



Oxford City Council – Leisure Services Review Benchmarking Performance

10th July 2006

Final Report

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Introduction

This report forms part of the strategic options appraisal of Leisure Services in Oxford. The options appraisal with Oxford City Council (the Council) when complete will have seven elements:

1. Gaining an understanding of Oxford's requirements and preferences;
2. Taking a view on the state of current services;
3. Benchmarking the current performance to comparable local authorities;
4. Identifying alternative service delivery options;
5. Discussions with the leisure facility operators (market testing);
6. Synthesis of all the above into a preferred solution or solutions; and
7. Reporting.

In this report we outline the findings of the benchmarking exercise (Stage 3). Through conversation with the Council it was agreed that the local authority areas to be benchmarked against would be: Cambridge; Preston; Northampton; Durham; and Guildford. These local authorities are categorised by CIPFA as being amongst Oxford's closest comparators against specific criteria.

To assess the relative performance of these five local authorities we have concentrated on the following areas:

- Pricing of various leisure facilities;
- Total visitor numbers to leisure facilities, growth in visitor number, and visits per capita;
- Staff numbers, staff costs, number of admissions per staff, staff cost per admissions, and staff costs as a proportion of total costs;
- Total income, income per visitor, and income generated per staff member;
- Costs, operating profits / deficit, subsidy per sq.m., subsidy per visit, and subsidy per capita; and
- Inclusiveness.

To conduct this exercise, information was requested from respective leisure officers at all five authorities and the Council. In some areas where the local authorities could not provide information we have supplemented our analysis with national statistics from Sport England (2004 data aggregated from previous KPMG and other studies) and from CIPFA Leisure and Recreation Statistics (2005-2006 estimates). In the case of Cambridge, who did not wish to participate in this exercise, we have used published data from the above sources as the only comparable data.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Pages 4 to 6 provide background information on the local authority areas and their facilities;
- Pages 7 to 12 present the results of the benchmarking exercise;
- Pages 13 and 14 draw together the conclusions and implications to the Council of this benchmarking study.

Background information - Oxford and Cambridge

Oxford

The local authority area of Oxford has a population of 142,000 residents (Source: CIPFA). Black and minority ethnic (BME) residents make up 12.9% of this population. The average wage is 9% above the national average and unemployment stands at 2.7% of the working age population.

The Council own and directly operate eight leisure facilities in the area. These are: Blackbird Leys Pool, Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre, Ferry Sports Centre, Oxford Ice Rink, Peers Sports Centre, Temple Cowley Pool, Hinksey Pool and Barton Pool.

Blackbird Leys Pool is a swimming pool covering a site of 460 sq.m. Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre is a gym and sports hall covering 3,398 sq.m.

Ferry Sports Centre comprises a swimming pool, a gym, a sports hall and squash courts. It covers an area of 3,179 sq.m.

Oxford Ice rink covers a site of 3,453 sq.m.

Peers sports centre includes a sports hall, a squash court, a swimming pool and tennis courts. It is on a site of 2,365 sq.m.

Temple Cowley Pool is a swimming pool, gym and sauna. It covers a site of 2,612 sq.m.

Hinksey Pool is a swimming pool on a site of 53 sq.m. Barton Pool is a swimming pool covering 1,297 sq.m.

Cambridge

Although Cambridge did not participate in the benchmarking exercise we have provided a brief overview of the facilities within the local authority area as it has been possible to compare certain published performance indicators against Oxford and the other authorities.

The local authority area of Cambridge has a population of 114,800. BMEs make up 10.6% of this population. The average wage is 4.2% above the national average and unemployment stands at 2.3% of the working age population.

Cambridge City Council has joint agreements with seven sports centres (either privately run or owned and operated by schools or trusts) to allow usage of these facilities by the public. The seven centres include: Kelsey Kerridge Sports Centre; Hills Road Sports and Tennis Centre; Cambridge Regional College Sports Centre; Abbey Leisure Complex; Netherall Sports Centre; The Leys Sports Centre; and Chesterton Sports Centre.

Cambridge City Council owns five swimming pools. Four of these pools are operated under contract by Sports and Leisure Management (SLM). These pools include Abbey Pools; Parkside Pools; Jesus Green Swimming Pool; Kings Hedges Pool; and Sheeps Green Pool.

Background information - Durham and Guildford

Durham

The local authority area of Durham has a population of 89,000. BMEs make up 2.3% of this population. The average wage is 12% below the national average and unemployment stands at 2.8% of the working age population.

The City of Durham Council own and directly operate six leisure centres in the area: Abbey Leisure Centre; Deerness Leisure Centre; Meadowfield Leisure Centre; Coxhoe Leisure Centre; Sherburn Leisure Centre; and Durham City Swimming Pool.

Abbey Leisure Centre includes a main hall, squash courts, an activity room, a weights room, a fitness suite and conference facilities. It covers an area of 1,500 sq.m and is open 84.5 hours per week.

Deerness Leisure Centre includes two gymnastic floors, a trampoline pit, two tumble track activity rooms, a weight room, a fitness suite and conference facilities. It covers an area of 1,300 sq.m.

The Meadowfield, Coxhoe and Sherburn Leisure Centres all cover an area of approximately 970 sq.m. and includes a main hall, squash courts, an activity room, a weights room and a fitness suite. The centres are open on average 87 hours per week.

The Durham City swimming pool is a 25 metre pool with a 10 metre learner pool. It covers an area of 750 sq.m. and is open for approximately 87.5 hours per week.

Guildford

The local authority area of Guildford has a population of 132,000. BMEs make up 4.1% of this population. The average wage is 14% above the national average and unemployment stands at 1.7% of the working age population.

Guildford Borough Council own and directly operate four leisure facilities in the area. These are run under the Borough Council's brand of 'Spectrum'. The facilities include: Ash manor sports centre; Guildford Spectrum; Guildford Lido; and the Workshop gym (on the same site as Guildford Lido).

Ash Manor Sports Centre covers 602 sq.m and is open for 84 hours per week. It is a dual use facilities including an all weather pitch, a school sports hall and a 40 station gym.

The Guildford Spectrum complex is a multi-sports site featuring a 32 lane bowling alley, an Olympic size ice rink, four swimming pools, a ten badminton court arena, a floodlit outdoor athletics track and football pitch, three squash courts, and a 107 station exercise gym. It covers an area of 104,000 sq.m and is open for a total of 122.5 hours per week.

The Guildford Lido is a 50m outdoor swimming pool open from May to September. It is on a 16,000 sq.m site and when operational is open for 75 hours per week.

The Workshop Gym is a heavy weights complex that is part of the Lido complex. It is open for 75 hours per week all year round. It covers an area of 75 sq.m.

Background information - Northampton and Preston

Northampton

The local authority area of Northampton has a population of 200,000. BMEs make up 8.4% of this population. The average wage is 5% below the national average and unemployment stands at 3.1% of the working age population.

Northampton Borough Council own and directly operate three leisure centres in the area: Danes Camp: Mounts Bath Leisure Centre; and Lings Forum Leisure Centre.

Danes Camp Leisure centre covers 4,325 sq.m and is open for 95.75 hours per week. Its facilities include a leisure pool with flume, a four court sports hall, a climbing & traversing wall, a diner, a crèche, a Trilogy Fitness Suite, two general purpose rooms and a health suite.

Mount Baths Leisure Centre covers 3,242 sq.m and is open for 95.5 hours per week. Its facilities include a main pool and teaching pools, a Trilogy Fitness Suite, a health suite and exercise studio.

Lings Forum Leisure Centre covers a total area of 4,700 sq.m and is open for a total of 107 hours per week. Its facilities include a 25m pool, a six court sports hall, squash courts, a Trilogy Fitness Suite, an exercise studio, a spinning studio, a bar/social area and a cultural cinema (situated within the building but which has its own budget).

Preston

The local authority area of Preston has a population of 136,900 residents. BME's make up 14.5% of this population. The average wage is 7% below the national average and unemployment stands at 3.4% of the working age population.

Preston City Council owns and operate four Leisure Centres in the area: Fulwood Leisure Centre; West View Leisure Centre; Ashton Leisure Centre; and Grange Leisure Centre.

Fulwood Leisure Centre comprises swimming pools, sports halls, a fitness studio, a sauna, a dance studio and a bar.

West View Leisure centre comprises a sports hall, swimming pools, A fitness studio, a sauna, s dance studio, a climbing wall and an outdoor artificial pitch.

Ashton Leisure Centre consists of a sports hall and fitness studio.

The Grange Leisure Centre includes two artificial pitches and a badminton court (Martial Arts).

Preston City Council did not provide floor areas for each of these facilities.

Benchmarking - Pricing

The pricing information in the table below is sourced from CIPFA 'Charges for Leisure Services Statistics 2005/6'. The table illustrates the national mean, the Council's pricing of leisure services and the pricing of the other comparative authorities. It shows that:

- Relative to the national mean, the Council charges more for some services (aerobics, fitness suite usage, swimming) but less for others (main hall hire, squash and badminton);
- For all but one category Guildford is more expensive than the national mean and comparable services offered by the Council;
- Northampton is cheaper than the national mean in all but one of the categories. Preston and Durham are cheaper than the national mean in all but two of the categories; and
- Pricing of the Council's leisure services compared in the table (apart from racquet sports) is in the top 50% of the comparable authorities.

We conclude from this that admission pricing at Oxford's facilities are within the range but towards the top-end of charges at the other five authorities (excluding racquet sports). Admission charges for badminton in particular are significantly below those charged at the other five authorities, and indeed are below the mean for non-metropolitan districts. There may therefore be scope for reviewing the pricing policy for badminton in Oxford. The authority with the highest charges (in most cases) would appear to be Guildford.

| Area | Main Hall (per hour) | Badminton (per hour) | Squash (per hour) | Aerobic class - per hour | Fitness suite - per hour standard charge | Fitness suite – annual charge (highest) | Swimming indoor– Adult weekday charge |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Oxford | £37.00 (2) | £4.60 (6) | £5.20 (6) | £4.40 (2) | £4.90 (3) | £363.80 (2) | £3.20 (3) |
| Cambridge | £34.00 (4) | £9.00 (1) | - | £3.30 (5) | £4.40 (4) | £360.50 (4) | £3.40 (2) |
| Durham* Sourced direct from centre | £30.00 (6) | £7.50 (3) | £5.50 (3) | £3.20 – £3.70 (3) | £5.30 (2) | £240.00 (6) | £1.70 (6) |
| Guildford | £35.00 (3) | £7.30 (4) | £8.80 (1) | £4.80 (1) | £6.00 (1) | £594.00 (1) | £3.50 (1) |
| Northampton | £40.00 (1) | £6.10 (5) | £5.50 (3) | £3.35 (4) | £4.35 (5) | £363.00 (3) | £1.85 (5) |
| Preston | £33.25 (5) | £8.00 (2) | £7.50 (2) | £2.80 (6) | £3.75 (6) | £330.00 (5) | £2.25 (4) |
| Non-metropolitan districts England mean* | £41.95 | £7.07 | £7.24 | £4.03 | £4.75 | £354.15 | £2.69 |

* Source: CIPFA Charges for Leisure Services Statistics 2005-06

Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

Benchmarking – Use of facilities in 2004-5

The table below highlights the number of visitors using leisure facilities in the six Local Authority areas for the year 2004-5. There are several findings stemming from this:

- Guildford has the most visits per annum at 1.7m. This is more than double that of Oxford. 1.5m of Guildford visits are to its Spectrum Complex which is by far the biggest facility of all the authorities in this report.
- Of the six areas, the Council is ranked fourth in terms of annual visits per sq.m and fourth in terms of visits per resident. Guildford achieves the highest level of visits per resident (13.0 visits). Preston is the second highest performing authority. Northampton has the least number of visits per resident at 4.8.
- There would appear to be a general decline in annual visitation across most authority leisure facilities. This trend is most apparent in Northampton and Oxford although it is acknowledged that during this period, the Ferry Sports Centre in Oxford was closed for refurbishment.
- The number of visits per sq.m. varies widely. By way of comparison, data from Sport England (for mixed facility leisure centres) indicates that the average benchmark for facilities in the lower quartile of facilities surveyed is around 86 visits per sq.m, while those in the upper quartile achieve around 104 visits per sq.m. On this basis, all but Preston, fall within the lower quartile of facilities. The expanse of the Guildford Spectrum significantly affects its performance against this measure.

From this analysis it would appear that visitation to the Council's facilities, particularly in terms of visits per sq.m, is relatively low. As this is a key driver of income the Council should seek to improve ways in which attendance levels can be improved. Otherwise the delivery of leisure services is unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term under current performance levels.

| Area | Number of Council operated facilities | Wet only (Visits per sq.m) | Dry only (Visits per sq.m) | Wet and dry (Visits per sq.m) | Wet only dual use (Visits per sq.m) | Dry only dual use (Visits per sq.m) | Total visitor numbers 2004/5 | Total visits per sq.m | Growth in visitor numbers since 2002/3 | Visits per resident |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--|---------------------|
| Oxford | 8 | 29 (2) | 120 (2) | 25 (3) | 0 | 0 | 750,934 (4) | 44 | -9% | 5.3 (4) |
| Durham | 6 | 103 (1) | 77 (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 515,595 (5) | 80 | -1 % (Since 03/04) | 5.8 (3) |
| Guildford | 4 | 3(3) | 149 (4) | 15 (4) | 0 | 99 (1) | 1,721,306 (1) | 14 | n/a | 13.0 (1) |
| Northampton | 3 | 0 | 0 | 78 (2) | 0 | 0 | 951,229 (2) | 78 | -8.3% | 4.8 (5) |
| Preston* | 4 | 0 | 127 (3) | 196 (1) | 0 | 0 | 945,800 (3) | 193 | -5.8% | 6.9 (2) |

*Note during this year some facilities in Preston underwent major refurbishment which would have impacted upon visitor numbers. The floor area figures used for Preston in this analysis are sourced from CIPFA Statistics. Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

2005/06 Oxford Council Performance Information: Total annual visits – 930,890; Total annual visits per sq.m - 55

Benchmarking - Staffing

Due to the difficulty in authorities being able to supply details on the total number of full-time or full-time equivalent staff (due to complications with self employed instructors) we have benchmarked the total number of employees (excluding casual workers) for each authority. The table below shows the results of this along with staff costs, number of admissions per staff member, staff cost per admission and staff costs as a proportion of total costs. All costs shown include central costs relating to the delivery of the respective authorities leisure services. There are a number of findings:

- The Council, based on these statistics, employs the most staff. However, figures provided for facilities in Oxford figures do include part-time staff. It is unclear if the other five authorities have included part-time staff in their totals;
- The Council has one of the highest staff costs per visit, which is not surprising given the scale of staffing provision and the lower performance of visits per sq.m at the Council's facilities.
- In terms of staff costs as a proportion of total costs, the Council is ranked fourth of the five comparators. By way of comparison, Sport England benchmarks indicate that staff costs as a proportion of operating costs are in the region of 85% (average) for facilities within the lower quartile and 53% (average) for facilities in the upper quartile (the mid-point was 57%). On this basis, Preston and Durham would fit within Sport England's upper quartile of centres, while Oxford would be within the third quartile (i.e., between 25% and 50% of Sport England's comparative set);
- Staffing levels at Durham are the lowest of the comparator set;
- Guildford has the most admissions per staff member. Northampton has the lowest admissions per staff member despite having the second lowest staffing levels; and

From this we can conclude that the Council do appear to have a relatively large work force and the highest staff cost per visit. While staff costs as a proportion of total costs are towards the lower end of the range, the level of visits per staff member need to be improved in order to be more in-line with leading performers.

| Area | Number of Council operated facilities | Total FTEs (Exc. instructors and casual workers) | Total staff costs** (2004/05) | Number admissions per staff member | Staff cost per visit (£) | Staff costs as % total costs |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Oxford | 8 | 112.5* (1) | 2,382,285 (2) | 6,675 (5) | 3.17 (1) | 53% (4) |
| Durham | 6 | 54 (5) | 1,324,200 (5) | 9,548 (4) | 2.57 (2) | 50% (5) |
| Guildford | 4 | 108 (2) | 3,212,703 (1) | 15,920 (1) | 1.87 (4) | 64% (1) |
| Northampton | 3 | 71.3 (4) | 1,831,848 (3) | 13,341 (3) | 1.93 (3) | 55% (3) |
| Preston | 4 | 73 (3) | 1,780,403 (4) | 12,956 (2) | 1.88 (5) | 59% (2) |

* Assumes part-time staff are 0.5 FTE's, ** staff costs shown for the Council include central costs but exclude the costs of the Sports Development function

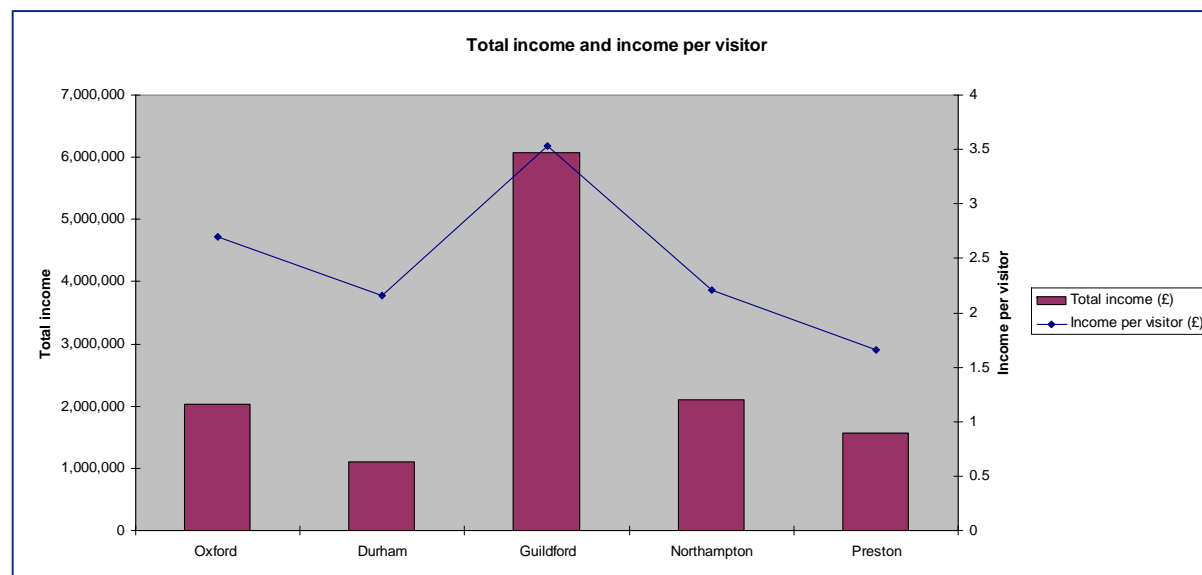
Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

2005/06 Oxford Council Performance Information: Total FTEs - (119); Total staff costs – £2,936,920; Admissions per staff member – 7,823; Staff cost per visit - £3.15; Staff costs as % of total costs – 55.1%

Benchmarking - Income

The table below outlines the total income, income generated per staff member and income per visitor. The graph (right) plots the results of total income and total income per visitor. Conclusions that can be derived are:

- Guildford has the largest income by a significant margin. This is a result of the substantial amount of income generated by its Spectrum Complex. The performance of its other facilities are in-line with other comparable facilities at other authorities in this study;
- Durham generates the least income, but performs better in terms of income per visitor;
- Guildford generated the most income per staff member. This is due to the high performance at the Spectrum Complex; and
- The Council's leisure facilities generate the least income per staff member. Income per visit at the Council's facilities is towards the higher end of the comparable authorities listed, and falls within Sport England's upper quartile under this benchmark (£1.70 being the average for the top quartile).



| Area | Number of Council facilities | Total income (2004/05) (£) | Income generated per staff member | Income per visit (£) |
|---------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Oxford | 8 | 2,033,125 (3) | 18,072 (5) | 2.70 (2) |
| Durham | 6 | 1,112,041 (5) | 20,593 (4) | 2.16 (4) |
| Guildford | 4 | 6,071,096 (1) | 56,151 (1) | 3.53 (1) |
| Northampton | 3 | 2,105,021 (2) | 29,523 (2) | 2.21 (3) |
| Preston | 4 | 1,565,760 (4) | 21,448 (3) | 1.66 (5) |

- Guildford generates the most income per visitor followed by the Council and then Northampton.
- Preston generates the least amount of income per visitor which is reflective of the lower admission prices highlighted on page 7.

The implications for the Council are that it is performing well in terms of income per visit, but the relatively lower levels of performance in terms of visitation (per sq.m) are impacting upon the overall financial performance. This is also reflected in the relatively poor performance of income per staff member.

Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

2005/06 Oxford Council Performance Information: Total income – £2,555,352; Income per staff member - £21,474; Income per visit - £2.75

Benchmarking - Costs

The table below outlines the total costs, operating profit / deficit, subsidy per sq.m, subsidy per visit and subsidy per resident. Where identifiable we have excluded capital charges. However, for some authorities it is unclear if total costs include such charges, the results therefore should be regarded as an insight into comparative costs. We would note the following key points:

- The operating costs of Guildford are the largest of all authorities. Given the size of the Spectrum and number of visitors this is not surprising. The Council spend the next highest amount;
- The Council has the highest operating deficit of the comparator set. However, when comparing the scale of operations, the Oxford performs better in terms of net cost per sq.m (third behind Preston and Durham);
- Guildford is the only authority to make a surplus operating leisure services. This is again as a result of the high performing Spectrum. Guildford's other facilities make an operating deficit;
- Oxford has the highest subsidy per visit which again reflects the relatively low visitation levels at the facilities. By way of comparison, data from Sport England indicates that sports centres in the upper quartile of their benchmarks have an average net cost per visit of £(0.10), while those in the lower quartile subsidise each visit on average by £0.83. On this basis, all of the authorities listed (except Guildford) fall within the lower quartile of Sport England's benchmarks.
- Oxford also has the highest level of subsidy per resident for the provision of its leisure services at £17.27. This is significantly higher than the average for English Districts of £8.13 (according to CIPFA data), but only marginally higher than that of Durham.

| Area | Number of Council operated facilities | Gross costs (Not including capital charges) | Operating profit / deficit | Net costs per sq.m (£) | Net cost per visit (£) | Net cost per resident (£) |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Oxford | 8 | 4,485,019 (2) | (2,451,894) (5) | 145 (3) | 3.27 (5) | 17.27 (5) |
| Durham | 6 | 2,644,510 (5) | (1,532,469) (3) | 237 (4) | 2.97 (4) | 17.22 (4) |
| Guildford | 4 | 4,989,991 (1) | 1,081,105 (1) | (8.96) (1) | (0.63) (1) | (8.19) (1) |
| Northampton | 3 | 3,311,940 (3) | (1,206,919) (2) | 98 (2) | 1.27 (2) | 6.03 (2) |
| Preston | 4 | 2,990,071* (4) | (1,432,315) (4) | 292** (5) | 1.51 (3) | 10.46 (3) |

Figures supplied included capital costs, we have thus deflated these by 19% based on Oxfords Capital costs being c.19% of total costs

** Based on floor area derived from CIPFA 05/06 Estimates, Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

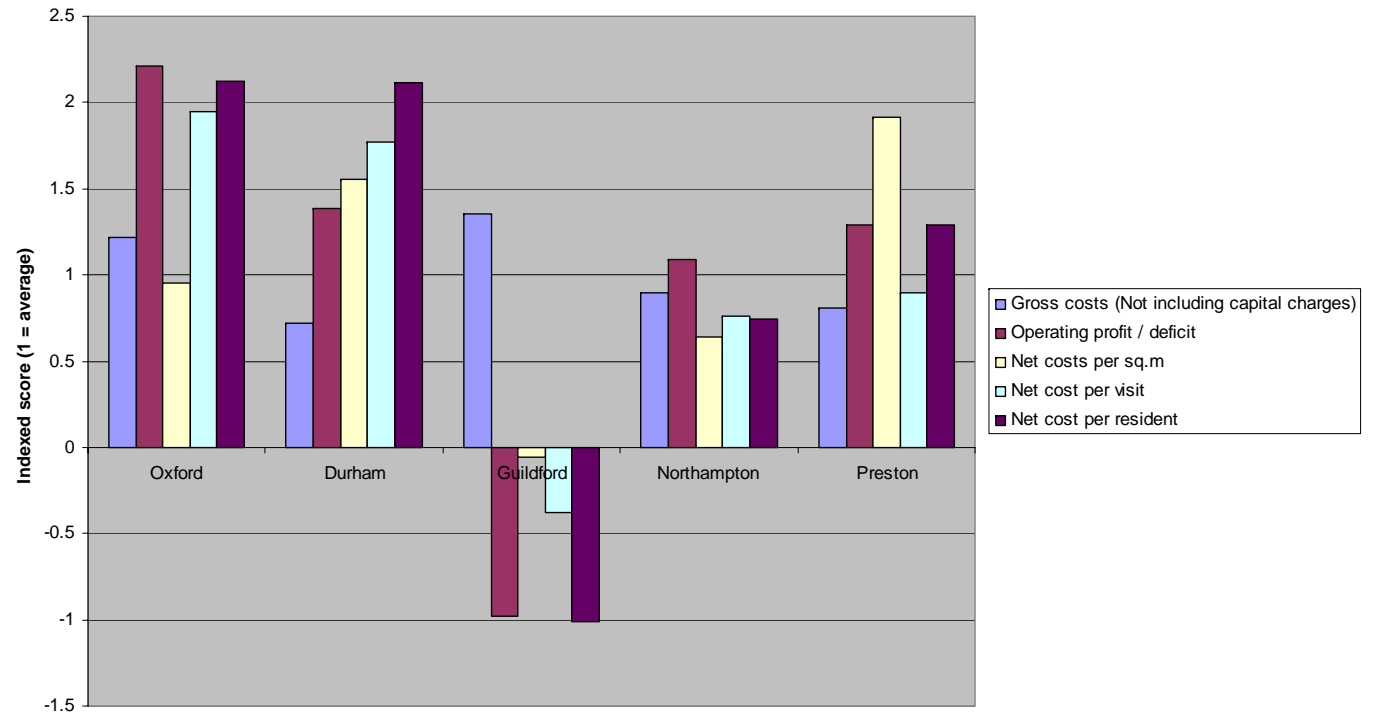
2005/06 Oxford Council Performance Information: Gross costs - £4,333,105; Operating deficit – (£2,777,176); net cost per sq.m - £164; Net cost per visit – (£2.98)

Benchmark costs (continued)

The graph right plots the indexed gross costs, operating profits / deficits, net costs per sq.m, net costs per visit, and net costs per resident for the Council, Durham, Guildford, Northampton, and Preston. The base index, 1, for each measurement is the mean of the 5 authorities. This is except for 'net costs per resident' where the CIPFA England average of £8.13 is used.

We can see that for the Council's facilities, every measurement is above average, i.e., lower performing. With the exception of net cost per sq.m which is marginally below the average, i.e., performing better than the comparator set.

Performance indicators



Benchmarking - Inclusiveness

Data on inclusiveness was only recorded for two of the six authorities and so it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from the proportion of users that are from ethnic minorities, are disabled or are male /female.

From the CIPFA statistics however we are able to deduce the volume and proportion of 'active' members (i.e., those that are currently fully paid up members of local authority leisure centres) that are from low income households. We have taken low income households to mean those from NSec categories 6, 7 and 8. Our analysis of these statistics is shown below. The results indicate that:

- Preston has the largest number of active members followed by Guildford;
- Cambridge has the largest proportion of active members from low income households;
- Guildford exhibits the lowest proportion of members from low income households; and
- Oxford has the highest proportion of active card members from low income families but the lowest proportion of the low income population as active members. This reflects the small number of total active members in Oxford.

Although it is difficult to draw many conclusions from this due to differences in pricing plans, socio-economic profiles and the operation of the private market one could conclude that there is greater scope for the Council to improve participation of low income households in the use/membership of its leisure facilities.

| Area | Number of Council operated facilities | Active members* | Active members from low income / benefit category | % Active members from low income / benefit category | Low income population** | % low income population as active members |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|---|---|-------------------------|---|
| Oxford | 8 | 6,087 (5) | 2,609 (3) | 42% (1) | 22,989 (3) | 11.4% (5) |
| Cambridge | 12 | 19,804 (3) | 4,624 (2) | 23% (2) | 14,866 (4) | 31.1% (1) |
| Durham | 6 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Guildford | 4 | 28,401 (2) | 1,816 (5) | 6% (5) | 13,801 (5) | 13.3% (4) |
| Northampton | 3 | 11,123 (4) | 1,984 (4) | 18% (3) | 47,930 (1) | 17.8% (2) |
| Preston | 4 | 31,440 (1) | 4,695 (1) | 15% (4) | 31,761 (2) | 14.8% (3) |

Source: CIPFA Charges for Leisure Services Statistics 2005-06

• Active or 'Live' members is defined by CIPFA as those who are current members of local authority leisure facilities. This may not necessarily reflect those who are frequent users of these facilities. ** Low income population defined as including NSec categories 6-8

Note – CIPFA data does not include students, whereas the NSec categories do. This is therefore likely to lead to an underestimate of the % of low income population as active members. Figures in brackets illustrate ranking of the different local authorities

Conclusions

Limited Information on Quality

Before summarising the conclusions it is worth investigating the question of the quality of facilities. We considered it inappropriate to compare customer satisfaction survey results as they were not collated in a uniform manner if indeed they were available at all. We chose instead to use Quest Ratings as a proxy for quality. Unfortunately the centres that had these were limited. The centres that did have a Quest Rating were: Guildford Spectrum (87%), Fulwood Leisure Centre: Preston (67%), and West View Leisure Centre: Preston (65-72% result pending).

The self-assessment Quest Ratings (undertaken in January 2006) for centres run by the Council were: Oxford Ice Rink (60%), Temple Cowley Pool (62%), Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre (45%); Peers Sports Centre (64%); Blackbird Leys Pool (53%); and Ferry Sports Centre (60%).

We can see that relative to the Council's facilities the Guildford Spectrum complex is far superior in terms of quality. The centres we have scores for in Preston are marginally better than all of those in Oxford. The Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre and Pool both have a rating significantly below any other centre.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this survey should be viewed in the context of information being provided to us and not being verified. The results could also be due to the differing markets, historical legacies and varied socio-economic contexts. Conclusion regarding the performance of management in each authority should therefore be made with extreme caution. The overriding conclusions that the Council could take from this include:

- The results of the benchmarking were dominated by Guildford and in particular the success of its Spectrum Complex. The Spectrum Complex is the largest facility among the survey sample, and is the only facility to generate an operating surplus and attracted by far the most users. This complex notably had a very high Quest score.
- The pricing of the Council's leisure services across the board is within the range of other authorities.
- There is a general trend of reduced annual visitation across all authorities analysed. In Oxford, usage has declined recently but this was mainly due to the closure of Ferry Sports Centre for refurbishment.
- Compared to other authorities in this benchmarking review, the Council achieves relatively low levels of annual visitation, particularly when analysing visits per sq.m.
- The amount of staff employed by the Council and the proportion of total spend it expended on staff was towards the high end of the range compared to the other authorities analysed.
- Based on CIPFA statistics, Oxford has a small proportion of its low income householders as members relative to other authorities.
- In terms of the operating subsidies of the leisure facilities, the Council has one of the highest net costs per visit and per resident of the comparator set. This is a reflection of the scale of facility provision by the Council and the relatively low levels of visitation at the Council's facilities in comparison to the other authorities compared in this report.
- Based on the Quest ratings Oxford's facilities are of much lower quality than the Guildford Spectrum and below those accredited in Preston. The Blackbird Leys Pool and Leisure Centre are particularly poor with ratings of 45% and 53%.

Implications

Implications

Given the discretionary nature of leisure provision and the pressures on the Council's budget, it is possible that the Council may need to scale back its leisure provision to reduce expenditure on this service. This is likely to be very difficult to achieve, but needs to be considered. However, we believe there may be scope to reduce the net cost of the existing level of provision, and our benchmarking review has identified a number of possibilities:

- There may be an opportunity to review the pricing policy at the Council's leisure facilities and identify areas where charges can be brought in-line with those of comparable authorities (as identified in this report). Our review of the facilities in Oxford indicate that there is no central pricing policy for leisure services and this could be a contributing factor to the variances in pricing of particular sports (i.e., badminton);
- Improvements in the level of annual visitation levels at the Council's leisure facilities are likely to be required in order to justify the existing level of staffing and sustain the existing provision of facilities. Annual visitation levels have fallen recently across the facilities – largely because of the refurbishment programme. However, it will be challenging to maintain market share without significant improvements because of increasing competition from private sector operators;
- Increasing annual visitation levels is likely to help reduce the net cost per visit and increase the level of admissions per staff member (which are among the lowest of the five authorities compared within this report). It may be possible to increase annual visitation levels through a combination of marketing campaigns to raise the awareness of the range of facilities provided by the Council (particularly among low income groups) and by investing capital to improve the quality of provision;
- There may be opportunities to review the existing staffing structure in terms of efficiencies. The Council's leisure facilities exhibit the highest staffing levels, staffing costs and lowest admissions per staff member of the five authorities compared in this study. While it is acknowledged that the staffing benchmarks provided may not be directly comparable in all cases, the staffing costs would appear to be high;
- The Sports Development function could continue to focus on increasing its targeting of low income users through specific marketing campaigns and other PR activities. In doing so this could help contribute to increasing annual admission levels as well as increasing the proportion of low income users at Oxford's facilities (a core strategic aim of the Council); and
- Appropriate capital budgets should be made available and concentrated on areas requiring quality improvements. Improvements in the quality of provision may help the facilities to compete more effectively against the threat of private sector operators and could also boost visitor and operating performance levels. It is however, recognised that capital investment alone will not necessarily deliver sustained performance improvements at the Council's facilities.