NEIGHBOURHOOD OPPORTUNITY

AN EQUATION WITH VANDALISM, DELINQUENCY AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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Today, when local authorities are looking as closely as they have ever done at their priorities, it is also being appreciated in many areas of the country that for one reason or another there has been a dramatic failure to meet community need, particularly in the urban neighbourhood situation. Perhaps the recent suggestion to redeploy New Town programmed resources to the inner cities is full recognition of the fact.

To equate leisure services with the living environment beyond the home, with vandalism and delinquency expenditure levels, and to gain a greater share of the corporate budget for leisure services, has been the difficult dilemma for officers and elected members in recent years.

When we examine, therefore, the facility starved neighbourhoods in Britain, it is not surprising that there has been a general lack of appreciation of the very special disciplines and qualities required for successful community management, particularly in terms of generating the widest possible range of valid opportunity.

A study of the social structure in most conurbations will reveal a situation where the recreation and amenity component has not been central to the planning process, but merely a land-use exercise measured against out-of-date standards. We find outselves in 1976, therefore, in a situation where the structure of society is crumbling in many neighbourhoods and where boredom dominates the scene, so creating a platform for all the social problems of high and escalating

vandalism and delinquency levels. Consequently, there has been no opportunity whatsoever to involve the community in the development or management stage—the key to creating the vital sense of belonging which must be generated if there is going to be any social stability at all

What has been tragic, and certainly inexcusable, is that ten years have gone since the progressive authorities in the field first began to implement the recommendations of the joint MHLG/DES Circular and harness the economic advantages of integrated neighbourhood social and community development-nevermind the dramatic social gains possible, given sound community management. The situation is all the more tragic when we remember that monitoring of recreation response at the time indicated a marked demand for neighbourhood facilities, where a multi-interest programme theme could be generated; one which could cut across the artificial boundaries of the Arts, cultural and physical recreation situation, supported by a sound social theme. Studies also indicated that well over 50% of all recreation demand was for the indoor situation, and one did not need to be a meteorologist in Britain to accept that

In the mid 60's we were also being informed that the three major problems for civilisation in the 80's would be population, pollution and leisure, in that order. For many local authorities, therefore, there has been a premature arrival of the future, as the attitudes of society towards living environment priorities has by-passed the approach of many local authorities. Why?—Because (1) we have failed to plan for people; (2) we have failed to develop a system in this country, whatever we say about local government reorganisation, which would link the tiers of local government and cut across the traditional roles of separate departments; (3) recognise the demands of successful community management; and (4) perhaps above all, create planning and management structures which would allow the community to be involved in the development process in a manner which would generate the appropriate social climate.

If we accept that given sound community management the only disadvantage for the education service within any joint scheme is the loss of autonomy on site; that the gains represent better schools, better community facilities, as well as dramatic opportunities for community orientated education—then in the future we must have a structure whereby we can harness the education, housing and recreation resources within a composite planning approach geared to meeting community need. Crucial within this will be an acceptance that schools today are, in embryo form, the leisure centres so badly required in many neighbourhoods. It should not be a question, therefore, of education or housing priority areas, but living environment priority areas. The Maud Report on Local Government Reorganisation, paragraph 322, summed up the limitations of the separatist approach. (Reference 1)

What we are really saying is that a neighbourhood application to the living, working and leisure environment at planning stage, as outlined by Jim Russell, together with a structure developed to harness all available resources of local government, as detailed by Alan Thomas, can generate a situation where many social planning goals can be achieved. Perhaps Francis Gladstone hit the nail on the head in his 'Politics of Planning', where he stated that we have allowed "the urban users to dominate the approach to community need, not the urban needers. We must lay bare the terrible things done to people in the name of planning."

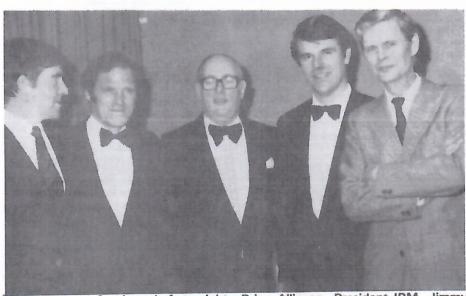
Community Management:

The realisation in Torfaen of a great deal of the constituent authorities social planning in the early 70's has been of considerable significance in many quarters, and is detailed in respect of philosophy, facility development and management structures in the Torfaen Brochure.

But the Council also recognised that however well it had harnessed resources in the housing, education and recreation sectors, sound community management in the future would have to be paid for and quantified in respect of rateable expenditure against the social planning goals within the overall philosophy. The Council recognised at an early date that leisure services within the local authority sector was a comparatively new development and in terms of marketing, programmes, generating community opportunity and in respect of community involvement, a different discipline entirely from most traditional local authority services. Within this concept, it was considered important that the management should be geared to the needs of the whole community, and, perhaps more important, to a degree where there would be community involvement in the management process and where there would be an opportunity in the future to equate investment in leisure services with the stability of social structures in most neighbourhoods.

Several principles had to be established at the outset: -

- 1. It was considered important to ensure that the various facilities, particularly the programme of the multi-interest centres, generated the widest possible role in terms of community use, with particular emphasis being placed on avoiding a narrow "sports centre" or "tracksuit" image. In short, centres have become the hub of community life, with a programme designed to provide as many cultural, recreation and social situations as possible.
- Within the overall philosophy, it was vital to create and maintain a programme gener-(Continued on next page)



ARM National Seminar. Left to right—Brian Allinson, President IBM, Jimmy Munn, Denis Howell, PC, MP, Roger Quinton, Les Davies, Chairman IRM.

ating valid community opportunity. Therefore, the booking and operational systems adopted at each Centre had to reflect its philosophy. For example, one important early step was the decision not to incorporate membership schemes. Such schemes have many advantages—not least financial—but have the inbuilt elitism element associated with membership which would have proved fatal during the period of community acceptance.

An early decision, therefore, was the establishment of a booking system designed to prevent the creation of pseudo clubs, by limiting bookings to six days in advance. There was also a basic brief to ensure the maintenance of opportunity for the casual or non-committed user.

It was, of course, recognised that certain pursuits would not develop in the way desired unless the motivation came from within the Centre. Thus, efforts were made to establish centre orientated clubs in such activities as swimming, squash, gymnastics, basket ball, indoor hockey and martial arts, in association with a well established, if fragmented, cultural programme. The important aspect, of course, being to give those clubs centre identity and thus reap the promotional advantage in-built in their projected success.

In future years, no doubt the most common and most justified criticism of the leisure revolution in the mid 70's will be that too much accent was placed on the track suit image of recreation, and not enough on the more passive and non-sporting pursuits. It is vital, therefore, that the programme is not only sufficiently community-orientated, but properly projected and marketed to a level which will generate the appropriate image in terms of community need.

The instigation and promotion of a programme involving a width of consistency within this theory, calls for a considerable management innovation and improvisation. Whilst nominally, perhaps a local government officer, a Leisure Centre Manager may be responsible for the leisure pursuits and safety of half a million people per annum, and for building and plant valued in seven figures, the Manager's role has in most parts of Britain been under-rated until now. He may be a publican, a shopkeeper, an engineer, a caterer, a P.R. and marketing expert, an impresario, a master of ceremonies, an accountant, a legal expert, a trouble shooter, a bouncer, but he must be inevitably an incurable extrovert, possessing all the vital qualities of a senior manager, capable of generating very good team spirit within the duty officer rota; an efficient communications system with all staff, and above all possessing all the subtle qualities of 'get on ability'. Not a combination found every day-and certainly not in local government! The management of a Leisure Centre, therefore, cannot be a man and dog operation, or indeed a function left to caretaking or supervisory staff. The right calibre of individual and support staff, and the salaries to attract such people, cannot be stressed too highly. It is, for example, important that a customer enquiry at 9 p.m. receives the same expert attention as one made at 9 a.m., and in this connection the Council has been adamant that senior management personnel be present at all times of public use throughout the rota operating 17 hours per day, 7 days per week. Thus, the dreaded duty officer routine, involving late night and weekend working. However, these unsocial hours are an integral part of the recreation commitment and there is no doubt that an office hours approach to the management of such facilities is a sure recipe for failure to meet community need.

The Manager, together with his duty officer team must, therefore, express and develop the community service philosophy of the appropriate Leisure Department and Committee, a function

that elusive element in local government—iob satisfaction.

It is now generally accepted that the strong social theme generated by such facilities as well appointed lounge bars and cafeterias, is an essential ingredient with a modern leisure centre, and perhaps an area of design worthy of more consideration. Certainly, as more and more centres are commissioned, the key to success will be the quality of the social theme.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that within any management structure it is crucial that the image of valid opportunity prevails at all times. Any suggestion that membership or age be a pre-requisite of use is the recipe for disaster. Even in community college or adult education centres, the "membership" image can create the wrong impression for the vast number of people in the lower socio-economic groups.

Too many leisure or sports centres in Britain have taken the easy way out, certainly in recent months, by reducing management and running costs to that minimum required simply to promote a club or group situation at the expense of casual community use. The result has been a complete failure in terms of local neighbourhood social structures and amenity impact. It is, therefore, fair to say that many communities have not had use or opportunity commensurate with their Council's investment in the leisure of sports centre development. Often too, with prestigious schemes such as large swimming pools, the recurrent cost against a single activity situation, with simply vending machines as supporting social provision, leaves the Council with little choice but to reduce hours of community opportunity. The situation is particularly true in some joint schemes where management is no more than "education-type" supervision as applied to further education situations, when community management is surely now recognised as an entirely different discipline. projects, therefore, represent a very poor social investment in respect of LSD capital for the community at large, and only a minor advance, therefore, on the village colleges of the 1930's.

I would go as far as to say that in respect of many large, single activity regional facilities and many joint schemes, the community has had a raw deal in terms of opportunity and social investment.

Conclusion:

While the major facilities in Torfaen illustrate the enlightened approach of the constituent authorities to recreation, leisure and amenity development—there are numerous small schemes of considerable local and long term community development significance. Within the Committee and management structures it is, therefore, not surprising that the Corporation and the Borough Council, together with Community Councils, have co-ordinated resources for outdoor and indoor recreation on a very comprehensive theme.

The Borough Council, at a lower level, has also formed Joint Committees with Community Associations and voluntary bodies to ensure that the latter are all involved effectively within a comprehensive approach to community management. The approach applies in respect of some twelve neighbourhood community halls, most of which were financed by the Development Corporation, and their affect on playgroup, playscheme and pensioner groups has had a dramatic impact on the social structure generally.

A further community development resulting from the participation levels has been the recent creation of the Cwmbran Grant Aid Committee, comprising representatives of the Borough Council, Cwmbran Town Council and the Federation of Community Associations. The Committee is financed on a partnership basis by the two authorities, in a manner which allows the Federation of Community Associations

to give financial support to community groups and voluntary clubs in all aspects of essential housekeeping overheads, so allowing the various bodies to realise fully their true function in respect of community development in its widest sense

The monitoring of the response factors indicates the crucial significance of a totally integrated approach to recreation, housing and education provision, and the great social benefits within a neighbourhood and community orientated approach to recreation planning and management (Reference 2). If the built-in advantages and potential growth aspects of the New Town are going to be harnessed, together with the well established heritage elements of the traditional communities, for the benefit of the community at large and the life style of the individual, then such an approach is crucial to overall success in achieving all principal social, planning goals.

The rewarding fact, in addition to the dramatic response by young people and families, and the older age group where appropriate, has been a slowly improving attitude by that element of the teenage population which seemed determined, in the honeymoon days of the five leisure centres, to create problems. These young adults are now positive users of the facilities, and while statisticians might consider existing examples to be straws in the wind, it is clear that where boredom does not dominate the scene in the urban environment beyond the home, then a valuable stability can be generated in any neighbourhood.

In this connection, the Torfaen Recreation and Leisure Department is working in close cooperation with the HOme Office and the Clerk to the Magistrates in launching an on-going exercise which will attempt to equate the creation of neighbourhood opportunity with levels of expenditure on vandalism and delinquency. Certainly at the moment, from the Council's own statistics, it is clear that vandalism

levels are on the decrease where opportunity has been created for all age groups.

For example, Home Office statistics indicate that the reported levels of criminal damage in the Torfaen area over the period 1974-1976, which equates with the commissioning of many of the facilities, has dropped by some 20%, while in adjacent authorities with similar socio-economic groups, but limited social planning, increases vary from 40% to 50%. Certainly in Torfaen, the national trend has been reversed.

Efficient management will be the key to ensuring, in terms of quality of life, that the Council's dramatic investment in the future is realised, and the various management structures being above average in grading and strength indicates this commitment. The Council has also recognised the need to create a Department with a considerable width of function, incorporating sections responsible for five leisure centres, community and play development, parks and cemeteries, a theatre, arts and entertainment, and museum and heritage services.

The development of the latter is now proceeding quickly, in full recognition that all forward planning must ensure that the heritage of the valleys survives, not only in the projected district museum at Pontypool Leisure Park and the national Industrial Museum at Blaenavon, but also in the regional sites and monuments linked by heritage trails throughout the Borough.

Leisure services, therefore, can be seen as a new, but vital local government service still in its infancy, which incorporates a host of elements which are crucial areas of the living environment. It is a service which can now be equated with health, education and housing provision and, therefore, one which must be crucial to the creation of stable social structures, and which must be seen and measured in terms of achieving the social goals of the Council and the community at large.

The service, therefore, in the neighbourhood

sector. How long do we stand and watch younger generations being media-bombarded with sex and violence? We are courting disaster if we allow the baser side of man to be encouraged; man's humanity consists of a thin crust only-the crust of culture and civilisation which the best representatives of mankind have through the ages had to strengthen; a crust which cracks with alarming ease, unfortunately, to release the violence and oppression which we, at this moment, witness all over the world-neighbourhoods, and even cities, where boredom dominates the scene, and where violence and killing are a way of

In terms of achieving stable community structures, local authorities, therefore have a straight choice - either in treating leisure services as a low priority frill on the budget, within an environment where boredom dominates the scene beyond the home and is surrounded by a crumbling social structure, or alternatively by making a positive commitment to harnessing resources at all levels of local government, in a manner geared to the creation of valid opportunity within a full recognition of the disciplines and needs for sound community management. Certainly, time is running out, and perhaps in some urban areas it is now too late.

Reference '1'

"322. Education is, indeed, the cuckoo in the local government nest. In origin extranaeous, in appetite voracious, it requites its foster-parents' tireless devotion with a less than filial display of family feeling. Yet eyen the cuckoo does not demand that the nest in which it chooses to lay its egg shall be designed to suit its offspring rather than the hedge-sparrow's, solely on the ground that its offspring will be consuming most of their food."

Reference '2'

Torfaen Borough Council—Recreation & Leisure Department

Relevant Facts and Figures

Population 93,000.

Propulation 30,000.

Various Sections of the Department are responsible for five Leisure Centres (two jointly planned with Gwent County Council), one Theatre, ten Community Centres, vast Parks and Outdoor Recreation Sections, together with Museum and Heritage Services.

approx. 2 million

1.4 million

Number of Users of all Facilities within

the Borough 1975/76.

Number of Users of all Leisure Centres within the Borough.

Number of Users of Pontypool Leisure

Pontypool Management Costs. £150,000 = 1p rate
Cost of managing ten Community Halls — ½p rate — 100,000
playgroup places per annum, with programmes varying from
Luncheon Clubs to Open University.
80% to 87% of users are Torfaen beau

Socio-economic response equates with that of the appropriate neighbourhood.

Total rate support, including standing and management costs, equivalent to 12p rate (approximately 50% of district rate).