

PLANNING: The earlier planning context for sports centres: 1960s-1980s

Town & Country Planning Act, New Towns and Professionals

It is important to remember the early context for sports centre planning, its progress and its relationship with research activity from the 1960s, as recorded in previous Chapters. The post-war New Towns Act 1946 and Town and Country Planning Act 1947, and subsequent New Town plans, marked the first important landmarks for planning sports centres. New Towns and Expanded Towns were planned in the two decades after the war and some of the early town plans in the 1960s, under the Acts, were at the heart of the creation of the first sports centres (see also Chapter 1 - 1.1). As we saw in Chapter 2, Harlow was the prime example, with the first UK indoor community sports centre being a vital part of the Harlow New Town plan (Harlow Sportscentre opened 1964). Other towns were also to benefit subsequently from new centre facilities, including Bracknell and Milton Keynes outside London; Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee in the north-east; Corby in the Midlands; Cwmbran in Wales; and East Kilbride in Scotland.

The history of sports and leisure centres is most obviously associated, professionally, with Recreation Management, now manifest in the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity. Professionally the history goes back farther, however, and is also the result of the work of other disciplines. When the first centres were emerging Town and Country Planning was itself evolving rapidly. The historic roots of the professions in architecture, landscape design, civil and municipal engineering and surveying, whose practitioners had overseen post-war reconstruction and the developing New Towns, were being augmented by a new wave of young planners (*link), for whom it was their first discipline.

Importance of planning highlighted

At the very beginning, in one sense, 'planning' for sports centres had been present in town planning, but it was rather limited at that stage. Proper planning for sports centres progressed slowly. The Annual Meeting of the PTRC group (Planning and Transport Research and Computation) in 1976 marked some progress. One of the seminars was concerned with Planning for Leisure. Its proceedings highlighted the importance of the planning function and included a paper by Jimmy Munn, then Director of Recreation and Leisure for the Borough of Torfaen. The paper was simply titled, 'Urban Recreation Planning, Torfaen – Basic Principles'. Its opening statement was - "The urban recreation and leisure development in the Eastern Valley of Gwent is largely based on the planning philosophy promoted by the former Monmouthshire County Planning Department". Munn had also identified that previously Housing, Education and Recreation as three local government services had tended to function in isolation. Local government re-organisation, he said, had provided the opportunities to remedy those weaknesses in the planning process. This analysis, by one of the profession's early leading figures, shows that the history was never just about facilities and management but the much greater responsibilities of planning and creating a sound social structure. Social and leisure planning was also an important strategic influence, reflected in a number of key publications at that time (see also Chapter 1 -1.6). Other disciplines too, such as sociology and economics, often from academia, were increasingly brought to bear on the sports centre scene.

'Planning for Sport' Published

Planning had entered the sports scene vocabulary in 1968 with the publication of 'Planning for Sport' (Sports Council/CCPR). This started planning processes over the next decades which sought to assess appropriate sports provision for the community, including sports centres. In the early stages planning was narrowly focused on what to provide and where, rather than a broader strategic planning picture.

Gradually improved methodologies developed, especially using comparative demographic and geographical data, and helped underpin the planning of centres.

Chapter 3 (3.3) articulated seven factors that led to sports centres being the preferred investment of local councils in the 1970s and for most of the 1980s. It has to be said that the planning for sports centres was not very sophisticated at that time, though there were exceptions. It would also be fair to say that up to the end of the 1980s the desire by local councils to provide centres for local communities was more based on the experience of provision elsewhere and positive community reaction, than broader strategic assessments (remember also the 'copycat syndrome' from one council to another).

Therefore, establishing sound planning processes for sport and leisure has been, at times a hard road. 'Torkildsen's Guide to Leisure Management – Guide 11 – Strategic Planning (Longman 1993)' provided a useful insight at the time:-

"Planning for leisure, however, has never been at the forefront of planning and leisure has never been a priority issue for governments".

Torkildsen also quoted Tony Veal (a well know researcher at the time) –

"The problem with planning for leisure is that, generally speaking, the planning profession knows very little about leisure while the leisure professionals know very little about planning....and yet the need for firmly based planning in the area of leisure is as great, if not greater, that in some other areas of public society."

In the seminal period for research and planning (broadly the 1970s) a learning process developed and there were scores of examples of the deliberations by researchers, planners and practitioners. Conferences and seminars were held – an example was a seminar organised by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) in August 1975 - 'Recreation Planning & Management in the new Local Authorities'. It rehearsed the early picture described in this Chapter. In addition, there was a whole series of publications from Inlogov, the Leisure Studies Association (LSA), CURS and the Sports Council/SSRC (later ESRC) and others. Research was also being commissioned (and conducted) by other national and regional agencies and by local authorities (especially for Structure Plans).

The statutory framework

The process of planning for sport originally had some of its roots in the statutory planning system. The construction of a sport and leisure centre requires 'Planning Permission', so new sports centres have always been subject to the system's rules, which have become an increasingly complex sphere. The role of local planning authorities has evolved as it has in reconciled policy frameworks, including the objectives and policies in Local Plans, and addressed public pressure. When set within financial constraints planning is also a balancing act. The statutory planning context of course works hand in hand with all the other strategic considerations.

Although local authorities were usually the applicants seeking permission for sports centres there were other site and policy issues that its own planning departments had to consider. 'Recreation Planning and Development (Neil Ravenscroft)' highlights the planning of Guildford Spectrum (opened 1993), which replaced a 1971 town centre sports centre. The concept and building went through a series of complex Council leisure centre planning stages in the 1980s and public response to the proposed out-of-town facilities was strongly favourable. A range of objections, including some from the public, led to an environmental study as permission needed justification and support. This led to a 26-month delay in final planning approval. It did also demonstrate that local demand can be a strong, favourable planning factor. Planning negotiations can become even more complicated if other

developers and planning consultants are involved. Thus, the 'Planning' function can be viewed from a variety of sport and professional perspectives. The Sports Council's planning functions, and sports centre planning generally, should be seen within this wider statutory context.

One other important statutory planning influence was for financial contributions to be made for additional community facilities under Section 52 (T&CP Act 1971), superseded by Section 106 (T&CP Act, 1990) planning agreements. This was in relation to planning permissions for new developments, including housing. This has since been replaced by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Some centres have been achieved, or their funding assisted, by this planning arrangement. Budmouth Sports Centre, in North Dorset, received S106 funding and Bewbush Leisure Centre in Crawley (no longer operational) was originally provided in this way.

Planning for sports centres and the role of The Sports Council

There are references in Chapter 4 - 4.2, and in 9.2, to the significant role of the Sports Council in initiating, leading and commissioning research into sports centres. The Sports Council (and then Sport England) has also played a key role at the strategic planning level. Planning – in various forms – was always a primary function of the Sports Council. From its inception the Sports Council was intent on a planned approach to the development of Sport. This reflected the early influence of geographers and the (Town & Country) planning profession; an influence amplified not just by Sports Council staffing but by the involvement of academic and local authority planners at national and regional levels. Planning for Sport itself (and, more widely, for Leisure and subsequently Culture) was an element of planning for the country's future needs through the policy frameworks of statutory 'Development Plans'. A planned approach to the development of sport, especially facility provision, had to be achieved through the national legislative and professional planning framework.

Chapter 7 (7.2) emphasised that the Sports Council played a vital, leading role not only in research in this period but also in strategic planning. As we have seen, it published a range of national strategies which underpinned planning processes for sport. Through the 1970s and 1980s Regional Councils for Sport and Recreation, supported by Sports Council officers, had monitored, mapped and published the strategic progress in both the numerical and locational provision of new community sports centres (see also Chapter 7 link to Regional Role of the Sports Council). This led onto strategic regional assessments for centre provision and encouraged good quality planning.

Early assessment processes and progress

Early assessments for centre provision were largely geographically based on population data. Mike Collins, of the Sports Council, in a presentation at an international gathering in Vienna 1979 described the UK sports centre scene at the time and highlighted the importance of geographical issues in planning indoor sports centres. He stated that the Sports Council recommendations then were for multi-sports centres to serve populations of 40-90,000 (with an additional centre per extra 50,000) and smaller rural centres, where users may travel in excess of 4-5 miles. Whilst studies of hinterland are important, he went on, they must increasingly be augmented by studies of preference and behaviour, as well as the economics and particular, local social characteristics. He had previously emphasized that catchments, like their activity and socio-economic profiles, are constantly changing.