

Reaching 2021

K2: From Opening to 2021

Whether the 1.4 million visitors annual (against a projection of 1 million), the extensive and varied events programme or the range of sports and physical activity development programmes, K2 Crawley can widely be considered a success against its original brief. Although the majority of the original brief has been realised, some elements were less successful and have required review and adjustment since opening. A summary of some of these is noted below.

Car Parking: Although less of an issue now, the original 350 car parking spaces (the maximum the Planners would permit at the time) caused significant operational issues in the early years. In particular, the hourly changeover for the numerous early evening children and adult classes resulted in many complaints about there being insufficient parking and customers missing the start of an activity.

Efforts were made to diversify travel mode including subsidised bus travel and improved covered and secure bike storage. In practice however, the demand to drive to and park within the immediate environs of K2 was significant and an additional 150 parking spaces (which the Planners agreed to second time around) was installed. The additional parking did abate the problem, albeit in a way which environmental purists may not have approved.

Foyer and Reception: The design of the foyer and reception was a concern pretty much from day 1. The conflicting issues of maintaining security and control, capturing user information and permitting quick and speedy entry of the anticipated 3000 plus customers per day proved hard to balance at the time. It was clear from an early stage that the balance to maintain security and usage data were at the expense of queues and annoyance to customers. Security gates were switched off while more customer friendly solutions were explored.

Ultimately, a combination of redesigned foyer with separate in and out entrances, the progression of technological solutions which improved self-swipe entry and the introduction of some secondary security controls for classes and the gym enabled a workable solution to be found.

The range of activities and complexity of visits to modern leisure centres is extreme however (pre-paid, pay on entry, member, non-paying guest, spectator etc. etc.) and it feels like there may be some further way to go, particularly with high volume facilities such as K2.

Arts and Entertainment Events: The brief for K2 also sought for the facility to double as an entertainment venue when the events diary permitted. With a seating capacity of 1,200 and a potential standing capacity of 3,000 (and nothing comparable between Brighton and South London), K2 had the potential to cater for medium size concerts and entertainment events. Although Paul Weller played to 6,000 fans over two nights in 2008 (noted for the artists flouting of the recently introduced smoking ban while on stage), the already busy sports events diary and the additional temporary infrastructure costs limited further such activity. To some degree, it has been the success of the sports events programme which has restricted the potential for entertainment events and although a nice problem to have, this is one area where the original brief has only had limited success.

Notwithstanding the various capital replacement items, a second tranche of investment commenced approximately 10 years after opening and coincided with the run in for the current contract period. These investments primarily sought to increase utilisation and commercial potential to support competitive contractor bids. These investments included:

3G Artificial Turf Pitch: The original sand based artificial turf pitch was due for resurfacing in the run up to the new contract in 2018. Following consultation with local clubs and in agreement with the adjacent secondary school (who use the pitch for their PE and afterschool sports clubs), the sand based surface was replaced with a 3G surface. Notwithstanding that there is a further full size 3G within 200 yards (adjacent to the Crawley Town Football Stadium), the demand for football on this type of surface has been significant and an underused outside area has quickly become fully booked.

Health and Fitness: Growth in demand for health and fitness activities has continued since 2005 with the 1,300 members from the old leisure centre increasing to 5,300 at the start of 2020. In response, additional spinning, and studio space has provided the capacity to ensure an increase in the quantity and variety of health and fitness activities. Again, this feels like an area where there could be further potential moving forward.

Climbing Wall: And to the facility which helped to inspire the K2 Crawley name. With the introduction of climbing as an Olympic Sport at Tokyo 2020, investment in the climbing wall has seen the introduction of speed climbing (to reflect the Olympic activity), bouldering and additional children's climbing facilities. Again, these have proved popular and ensured new audiences continue to be attracted to K2.

Nigel Sheehan

**Head of Partnership Services
Crawley Borough Council**