

## THE NUMBERS – THE FINALE

### HOW MANY INDOOR SPORTS CENTRES ARE THERE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM?

Mike Fitzjohn and Malcolm Tungatt, December 2021

#### Introduction

1. It will be apparent from a reading of earlier SLLP Chapters that this is a question which has proved very difficult to answer and, quite simply, there is no universally 'right' answer. So this paper, and the four other papers outlined below on which the data is based, can only be an attempt. Difficulties include matters of definition across the four countries of the United Kingdom (UK), the previous lack of any consistent data gathering and the embryonic nature of the 'business' in the 1960s and 1970s.
2. However, we now have the opportunity, never previously undertaken to our knowledge, to address the question with rigour and consistency based on the 'facilities databases' of each of the four countries:
  - The 'Active Places Power' interactive website, established by Sport England in 2003/4;
  - The 'Active Places' spreadsheets provided to us by Sport Wales, also established in 2003/4;
  - The 'Facilities Database' spreadsheets provided to us by Sport Scotland, which were set up to provide data for their Facility Planning Model in the early 1980s;
  - and the 'Active Places' searchable information website established by Sport Northern Ireland in 2016.

#### Objectives

3.
  - a) To present an analysis of the development of indoor sports centres, *over time*, in the UK based on the more detailed reports we have produced for England, Scotland and Wales including the number of openings, closures, and refurbishments. Unfortunately, the limitations of the Sport Northern Ireland database for our purposes do not allow us to include Northern Ireland in this historical analysis.
    - *How many Indoor Sports Centres are there in England?*  
*Mike Fitzjohn and Malcolm Tungatt, July 2021;*
    - *How many Indoor Sports Centres are there in Wales?*  
*Mike Fitzjohn, Malcolm Tungatt and Hywel Griffiths, September 2021;*
    - *How many Indoor Sports Centres are there in Scotland?*  
*Mike Fitzjohn and Malcolm Tungatt, October 2021;*

- b) To examine levels of provision in 2021 across the whole of the UK, including the data contained in our detailed report for Northern Ireland.

- *How many Indoor Sports Centres are there in Northern Ireland?  
Mike Fitzjohn and Malcolm Tungatt, November 2021;*

### **Defining indoor sports centres**

4. The Introduction to the SLLP indicates that the preferred definition is the one broadly accepted from the early days by the Sports Council and adopted by 'The British Leisure Centre Guide 1993', published by John S Turner Associates in association with Longman Group UK Limited:

***It is – an indoor sports centre with a sports hall and some other facilities, which may include a swimming pool, and has significant use by the general public.***

5. We have also adopted the Sport England 'Active Places' requirement that one of the sports halls in each centre should be three badminton courts or more in size, but this cannot apply to the Northern Ireland data where the size of the halls is not recorded.

Thus we have excluded any facility which:-

- a) does not have a sports hall at all;
  - b) only has a hall less than three badminton courts in size;
  - c) has a hall that meets the three badminton court requirement, but has no other ancillary facilities, i.e. stand-alone sports halls;
  - d) is only available for private use or, in the case of educational establishments, is only available for use by their students.
6. This does, of course, rule out quite a number of significant facilities which many would colloquially accept as 'indoor sports centres', particularly freestanding swimming pools and leisure pools, but the important point here is consistency of definition.

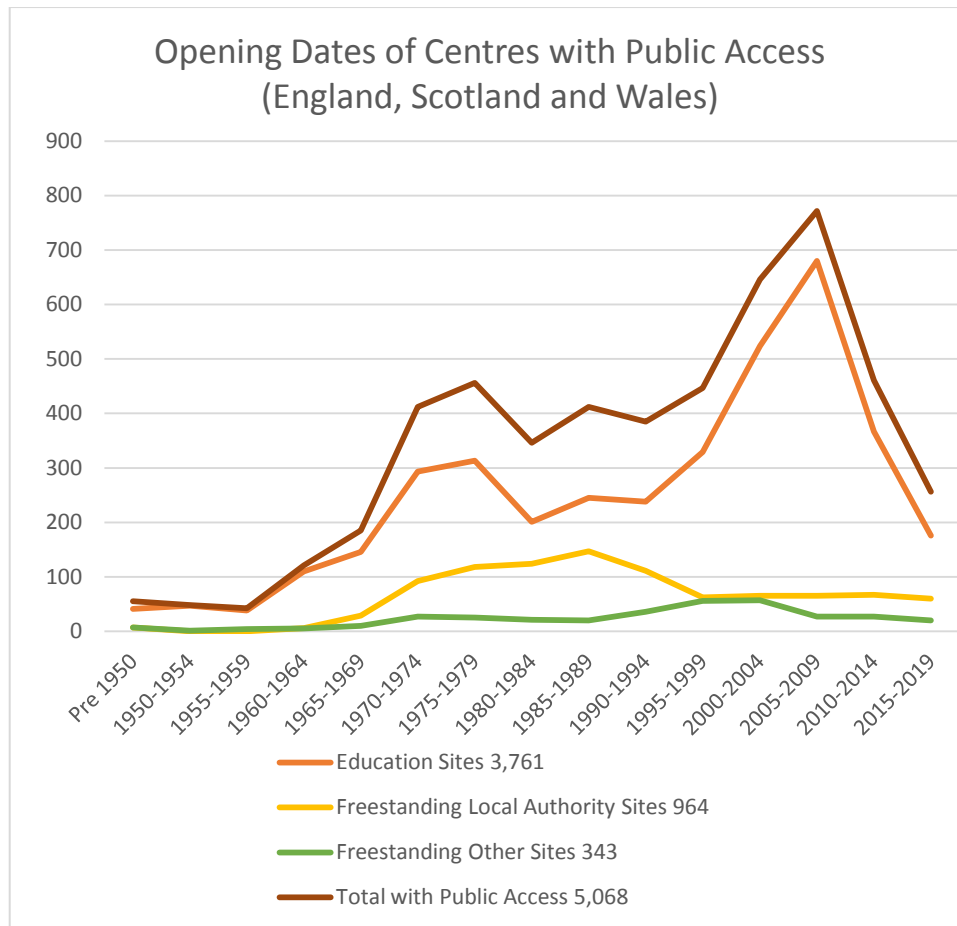
### **The advantages and disadvantages of using the four databases for our analysis**

7. The advantages are:
- a) the vast majority of the data appears to be very accurate;
  - b) they all present the data on a consistent basis;
  - c) they all have comprehensive coverage across each country;
  - d) they have all been updated on an ongoing basis.

8. However, there are several disadvantages:
  - a) a very small amount of the data is obviously wrong. Where we have clear evidence of this, we have amended each dataset accordingly;
  - b) they only give data for individual facilities (e.g. Main Halls, Activity Halls, Squash Courts, Fitness Gyms), so we have had to manipulate the data in accordance with our definition of indoor sports centres;
  - c) build dates of individual facilities are recorded in England, Scotland and Wales, but they do not identify when public use (e.g. of school premises) actually began. Therefore, they tend to overestimate the role of school premises built prior to the 1970s;
  - d) whilst they record the 'ownership status' as it is in 2021, they do not give any relevant history;
  - e) the timing of their establishment, and in particular the records of closure dates, usually include most centres built post-1975 but we are conscious of some omissions of earlier centres and we have augmented the datasets from other SLLP research, facility websites or our own personal knowledge.
9. Each of the four papers we have produced contain more details of the Methodology and Protocols we have used to interrogate the four different datasets.

### **The provision of centres over time (England, Scotland and Wales)**

10. It is inevitable, given the population and number of centres in each country, that the wider UK position will be dominated by England. Readers more interested in the position in each country are referred to the individual country reports. The chart below shows the aggregate position.
11. In total, just over 5,000 indoor sports centres have been provided; an amazing number. A little appreciated fact is that almost 75% of them have been on education sites, mainly school sites. Freestanding Local Authority centres account for a further 19%, and Freestanding Other centres (sports clubs, commercial companies, community organisations, MOD, charitable trusts, etc) just under 7%.
12. However, it is important to point out at this stage that Freestanding Local Authority sites are not the sum total of Local Authority endeavour in the provision of indoor sports centres. In particular, that data excludes centres jointly provided between Local Authorities and Local Education Authorities on school sites, principally in the 1970s and 1980s, which are included in the 'Education sites' totals



13. It is possible to discern many of the key trends and influences over each decade:

1960s an upturn in provision on new and expanded school sites as the 'baby boomers' reached secondary school age, and the earliest provision of Freestanding Local Authority centres.

1970s the surge in provision of Freestanding Local Authority centres fuelled by Local Government reorganisation in England and Wales in 1974, and further growth on school sites from 'joint provision' and the advent of comprehensive education.

1980s a continuing increase in the provision of Freestanding Local Authority centres, peaking in 1985-1989, but a downturn in provision on school sites from the peak of the 1970s.

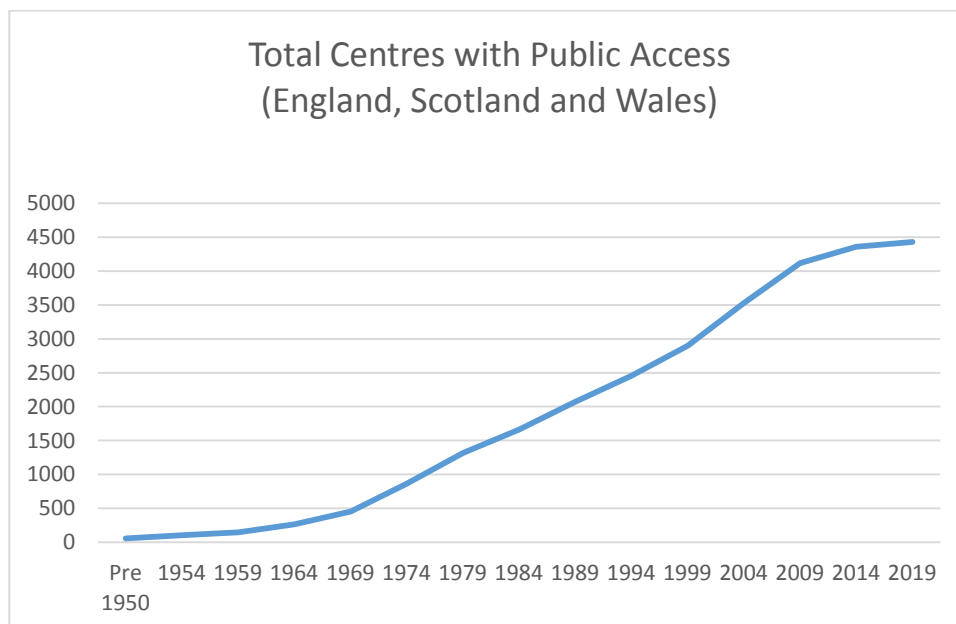
1990s a downturn in new provision on Freestanding Local Authority sites, probably brought about by the threats perceived from Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Provision on school sites levelled in the first half of the decade, but accelerated from 1995-1999, as did the Freestanding Other sector, probably stimulated by the launch of the National Lottery in 1995.

2000s provision of Freestanding Local Authority centres levelled at about 60 per five year period, continuing at this level to 2019. But there was a massive surge

in provision on school sites in all three countries, influenced by the need to replace the ageing 1950s and 1960s school stock. There was significant investment in Scotland and Wales, and programmes such as 'Building Schools for the Future' and 'Academisation' provided the stimulant in England.

2010s while, as indicated above, provision in the Freestanding Local Authority sector remained level through this period, new provision on education sites fell sharply from its previous peak to levels more common before the surge.

14. Before we can move on to a statement of the current position it is also necessary to consider the closure of some of the above centres because, since the turn of the century, there have been major programmes of both refurbishment and closure. Self-evidently, much of the school rebuilding programme has been accompanied by closures, and much of the Freestanding Local Authority provision has been the replacement of some of the early centres.
15. In total, about 1,850 centres (36% of the stock) have been refurbished, at an average age of about 25 years, although some of these have subsequently closed. About 630 centres (12.5% of the stock) have closed, at an average age of 31 years. The net result is that the overall number of centres has started to flatline in the past 5 years.



### **Provision in 2021**

#### **(England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)**

16. By removing the above closures from the 'openings' data for England, Scotland and Wales, and adding in the centres in Northern Ireland, it can be seen that there are currently nearly 4,600 centres in the United Kingdom. The average age of all centres is 27.5 years.

## CENTRES AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC IN 2021

	Education Sites	Freestanding Local Authority Sites	Freestanding Other Sites	TOTAL WITH PUBLIC ACCESS
England	2905	604	251	3760
Scotland	322	119	21	462
Wales	126	71	18	215
Northern Ireland	62	62	27	151
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3415</b>	<b>856</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>4588</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>74.4</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>6.9</b>	

17. Provision per head of population across the UK is about one centre to 14,500 people. The national variations are shown in the table. Interestingly, while in England, Scotland and Wales it is the more rural areas which have the highest levels of provision per head, in Northern Ireland it is the mainly urban districts of Belfast, Antrim and Newtonabbey, and Derry and Strabane which, we believe, reflects the policies of the Councils in those areas in seeking to provide *parallel levels* of sports provision for their two communities with distinct traditions.

	Population per Centre
England	14,970
Scotland	11,825
Wales	14,665
Northern Ireland	12,541
<b>UK</b>	<b>14,559</b>

### A Final Finale

18. In this exercise we have stuck rigidly to our definition of an indoor sports centre for the reasons outlined in paragraph 7. However, we are conscious, not least from Chapter 10 of the SLLP website, of the increasing practice of 'indoor sports centres' being built without Main Sports Halls. We have, for example, noted:
- a) the conversion of existing Main Halls into "specialist" facilities - trampolining, badminton, gymnastics, and, of course, large equipped fitness centres;

- b) the conversion of existing Main Halls from the traditional multi-sport hall with different sport "markings" on the floor, into other forms of multi-use space;
- c) new centres being built with equipped gyms and/or fitness centres and other ancillary facilities, including some swimming pools, but no Main Hall;
- d) new centres being built with two or more smaller Activity Halls, rather than one Main Hall.

19. It is difficult to obtain precise data on this new phenomenon, but our best estimates from that available are that some 20-25% of 21<sup>st</sup> Century 'indoor sports centres' fall into this category. Whither the definition of an indoor sports centre in the future? Should the old definition be replaced after over 50 years? Perhaps, but we must leave it to the current generation of practitioners and researchers to reach agreement on an alternative for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

MF/MT

Manchester, December 2021