

## **Mid Wales Regional Committee Mid 04-02**

Date: Friday 1 November 2002

Time 10.30 - 1.00 pm

Venue: Plas Dolerw, Newtown

### **NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES - PRESENTATION TO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES SELECT COMMITTEE ON FRIDAY, 1 NOVEMBER, 2002.**

**Presentation prepared by Paul Griffiths, Head of Recreation and Countryside Services.**

**Subject:** Response to the Audit Commission's Document 'Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research - Board and Recreation'

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The above document sets out a critique of Sport and Recreation within the Public Sector. The document is by nature broad and general, giving comments on the service as it is delivered across the United Kingdom. As such it is largely reflective of the Urban Environment and therefore makes particular reference to Urban experience.

The overall principles contained within the document are accepted as sound and largely reflect good management practice. The document is not however particularly ground breaking in its various propositions and although examples of good practice are useful there is nothing significantly new in the findings.

There are however, a number of issues that should be responded to in respect of Powys which are dealt with in the remainder of this paper.

#### **2.0 POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL - LEISURE SERVICES**

Prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2002 Powys County Council located the responsibility for resourcing such services through the Community, Leisure and Recreation Department. This Department was set up in 1996 within the new Powys County Council Unitary Authority. More recently re-structuring of the Authority has now

placed the service within the new Economic and Community Regeneration Directorate alongside such services as Planning, Economic Development, Tourism, Community Grants, The Arts and Culture, Countryside Services, and Outdoor Recreation.

In 1998 a detailed review of Leisure Services was commenced by the old Community, Leisure and Recreation Department with a view to developing a new strategy in order to better inform the business planning process and thus improve services to the general public.

This process included extensive audit of current provision together with the application of a number of business planning models together with extensive consultation with a wide range of stake holders. This process was overseen by a Steering Group which included representatives from the Statutory, Non Statutory, Voluntary and Private Sector as well as County Council Members. This work culminated in the launch of the Leisure and Recreation Strategy for the years 2000-05. Following on from the Strategy detailed Business Planning commenced with particular use of the EFQM model. This work also included the establishment of detailed local performance indicators.

A further exercise to ensure consistency of approach across the Council's 17 Leisure and Sports Centres resulted in the adoption of an information gathering process which also included detailed consultation with staff and the utilisation of Information Technology. During the latter stages of 2001 and early stages of 2002 a draft Business Plan was developed based on the aims and objectives of the Leisure Strategy. This Business Plan was adopted for implementation in time for the current financial year. The Plan contains a detailed Service Improvement Programme which focuses on a wide range of objectives to be addressed over the coming years.

A copy of the Business Plan and Service Improvement Programme and a copy of the Leisure Strategy will be available at the presentation.

### **3. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

As a part of the Service Improvement Programme a number of weaknesses within the service have been identified and actions are now being taken to address them. Recently a more detailed consultation methodology has been developed to include both users and non-users of services in order to gain a better understanding of what improvements in service delivery can be made.

Much of the good practice contained within the Audit Commission Document has

already been embraced within the ongoing management philosophy of Leisure Services within Powys County Council. It is recognised that there is much to do to ensure continuous improvement but there is confidence within the service that improvements can be made by working closely with a wide range of stake holders.

The Audit Commission Document makes significant reference to the need to consider how the Authority can facilitate Sport and Recreation Services rather than necessarily provide them directly. The report also goes on to describe a "rapidly growing Private Sector which offers a range of modern, attractive sports facilities and varied activities". It is suggested that this statements in particular is not reflected in a County such as Powys. A number of efforts have been made to invite the Private Sector into Powys particularly in relation to the potential for direct operation of facilities owned by the Authority without success.

On the first occasion in the early 1990's an extensive exercise to generate Private Sector interest in Local Management arrangements resulted in no interest being generated although significant resources were expended on the exercise. A further similar attempt made during 1996 and 1997 with interest being expressed by one company but the cost submitted was significantly higher than that being incurred by the Local Authority at the time. In addition there are very few examples of a " Growing Private Sector" in relation to the Sport and Recreation Industry within Powys.

Obviously the sparse population and geographical circumstances of Powys do not apparently generate interest from the Private Sector. Where such facilities have been set up they have usually been a smaller part of another development i.e. Hotel or have been poorly resourced and thus of little attraction to customers. At the time of writing there is no clear alternative Private Sector Provider within Powys which could demonstrate an alternative from that provided by the Public Sector.

It is also more expensive for the Local Authority to provide accessible Sport and Recreation Facilities within Powys than it is in an Urban Environment. The County of Powys has approximately 124,000 residents with 17 Leisure and Sports Centre. These Centres are spread across the whole of the County in areas of population that range from approximately 2,000 to 12,000 residents. Accessibility in terms of transport is sited as a barrier to use of these facilities and therefore a reduction in the current number of facilities would only serve to increase this problem further.

The cost of providing the infrastructure described is not reduced because of the population. Levels of staffing, energy, together with repairs and maintenance do

not decrease proportionally because of low levels of population.

The provision of Sport and Recreation within Powys is also an important economic infrastructure issue. In order to both retain and attract people to the area it is important that opportunities provided in more Urban locations are available to some degree within the Towns of Powys.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL PRESSURES**

Since the introduction of CCT in the early nineties the service has become largely income dependent. In addition during the mid 1990's reductions in budgets within Powys meant that either significant increases in income or reductions in expenditure were required to balance budgets. Unfortunately reductions in expenditure occurred in areas of maintenance and marketing whilst increases in income were achieved by raising prices. This has left a legacy of higher than average prices potentially discouraging some elements of the Community The objectives of the Business Plan and Service Improvement Programme seek to address this situation.

References are also made within the Audit Commission Document to the lack of link between facilities and Sport Development particularly as a result of Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Much effort has been made within Powys to ensure that the service is as integrated as possible.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The Audit Commission Document is welcomed as confirmation that many of the actions taken within Powys are considered to be good practice. The Private Sector references made within the document are not currently applicable to Powys. At a time when retention of the young people within the population of Powys is important to its future, it is also important that services provided within Sport and Recreation reflect their needs as well as those of the wider population. The role that the Local Authority plays within Powys of ensuring that such opportunities are available is essential to population retention, as well as providing the benefits of Health, Lifelong Learning and community development.