

ALL'S WELL

Local authorities are increasingly moving to a new 'one-stop shop' approach to wellness, as Nick Ryan discovers

It was born way back in the 1950s, went through a Californian transformation in the 1970s, then finally made its way around the world: wellness.

Today, wellness programmes abound: images of spas, health diets, yoga and other 'life balancing' pursuits tend to come to mind, typically in privately-run operations which charge a premium for shaping up the mind, body and spirit. But there is a new trend on the horizon – one where the general public has a say.

For the last few years, local authorities across Britain have begun investing in wellness and wellbeing facilities. Typically these blend not only health-oriented classes and services, but also other centrally-run services such as libraries, doctors' surgeries, therapy practices and,

in some cases, even other public facilities such as police stations.

As a result, the image of the local authority leisure centre is undergoing something of a reformation. Out with the tired-looking buildings and in with a new generation of 21st c

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Craig McAteer, cl
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portfolio of leisure
provide high quality, accessible community wellbeing facilities. Prime examples are the new joint service centres that embrace a number of strategic partners."

in with the new

Wigan, for example, is building a £67m PFI-funded Joint Service Centre that will



open in 2011, while South Lanarkshire has just created a complete wellness provision for community use, similar to the model used by Nuffield Proactive Health in the corporate sector.

Meanwhile, Oldham Council is planning



Primary Care Trust physiotherapy department in its Chesham Leisure Centre, with a similar conversion planned at the Wycombe Leisure Centre.

Back in 2006, Sunderland unveiled its Customer Service Centre at Bunny Hill, bringing together business, voluntary and public sector organisations under one roof. As Paul Dobson, director of community and cultural services at Sunderland City Council puts it: "This is a new public sector approach to health and fitness. This is what good practice will look like, mirroring what the private sector offers in some ways – such as its links with BUPA – but offering it all in line with the NHS philosophy."

The days of procuring and building pure leisure facilities are gone



Downham Health & Leisure Centre was one of the first 'lifestyle centres' heralding a public-private wellness partnership



Meanwhile Andrée Deane, chief executive of the Fitness Industry Association, talks of two very interesting dynamics taking place. “The first is the evolution of the industry, from a collection of gyms and leisure centres into a health

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leisure and health provision with vital community-centric services such as libraries, provides a valuable integrated solution for today’s time-starved consumers. The Grove Wellbeing Centre in Belfast is an excellent example of this new hybrid.” (See information box p34)

wellness predecessors

But the concept of a ‘one-stop’ response to delivering holistic services is not new, according to David Albutt, policy officer for the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA).

“The Peckham Pulse story goes back many decades, predating the present provision,” he says, “and plenty of councils have recognised that services need to be bundled, and need to include partner input, to be effective.

“The millennium was a particular catalyst, with partnerships such as Healthy Oxford 2000 seeing pioneering work between leisure services, local health trusts and other partners focusing on early intervention and ‘wellness not illness’. This initiative was commended by the World Health Organisation and featured joint roadshows organised around Oxford’s parks, taking the one-stop approach to the local communities and successfully targeting harder to reach groups.”



the new breed

Downham Health & Leisure Centre in south London was one of the first in a batch of new centres heralding the public-private wellness partnership.

Dubbed a ‘lifestyle centre’, it opened last year as part of a £16m partnership between Leisure Connection and PFI specialists Linteum, employing Alfred McAlpine Capital Projects for the design and build. The site offers a library, council access point, primary care centre with two GP practices, dentist, sexual health clinic and local outreach services, plus a leisure centre (25m pool, gym, studio).

“The centre is thriving,” says Graham Farrant, CEO of Leisure Connection. “The community is fully engaged and taking full advantage of the facilities on offer. Health schemes such as GP referral are proving extremely successful, and the seamless nature of the services is testament to the excellent working relationship that is shared within the partnership.”

The Customer Service Centre at Bunny Hill brings together business, voluntary and public sector organisations under one roof

Farrant says there is interest from public sector organisations that want to learn more about working jointly. “But they all seem to offer the same reasons as to why their ideas can’t be delivered – budgets and resources. I don’t always agree with this justification. There are plenty of ways to operate fully functional services by thinking outside the box.”

Meanwhile, Oldham’s facility in Chadderton is scheduled to open in spring next year. It is replacing a much older building, which had its pool closed for health and safety reasons.

“The new building will have a swimming pool, fitness suite, library and café, with a small police station at the rear,” explains Darren Burley, health and fitness manager ▶

The Grove Wellbeing Centre in Belfast offers a library and swimming pool among its community facilities



► for Oldham Community Leisure. “There may be other outlets too, along the lines of a reflexologist or physiotherapist.”

Integration on this scale inevitably has its difficulties. Burley talks of “several challenges” to overcome. “The main one is communication,” he explains. “Letting every partner know what each other’s plans are, should they interlock, and working together on such issues as cleaning, security, and responsibilities.”

With a £20m minimum threshold now imposed for PFI projects, funding can be added to the list of challenges; smaller schemes similar to Downham will now have to seek alternative funding routes.

one for all?

So are these wellness hubs for everyone, and do they represent a challenge to the private sector?

Neil King, commercial director at SLM, calls the wellness centres “a very interesting move towards creating a more holistic approach to health and fitness.”

He adds: “We’re increasingly being asked to look at this as a solution for local authorities. However, it’s not a one-size-fits-all solution.”

“Among the centres we currently handle in the UK, it might be more relevant for our more rural locations to consider a wellness centre with a number of services under one roof than it would for a city centre leisure centre. Also, location will be key; we know from research that people are only prepared to travel 20 minutes to a leisure centre.”

According to Justin Musgrove, spa director at Bannatyne Fitness: “A focus on wellness among local authorities is not a shift in thinking, but a signal of the way our modern lifestyles now demand those services which promote and facilitate ‘wellness’, and the need for them to be widely available.

“Private sector operators will need to remain one step ahead in their offering and in the quality of their facilities.”



THE GROVE WELLBEING CENTRE, BELFAST

It’s been heralded as one of the most innovative developments in Ireland.

An up-to-date facility that replaces three existing buildings and allows for better integration of public services, the Grove Wellbeing Centre is a multi-million pound, one-stop shop for health, leisure and education.

Built jointly by Belfast City Council, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the health service, the £22m centre opened in May. It will be home to nine GPs serving 140,000 people, and will also offer physiotherapy, occupational therapy, facilities for older people, dentistry, a 25m swimming pool, fitness suite, soft play area, 10-pin bowling, café and library with internet access.

Katrina Morgan-Talbot, acting leisure services manager, says a single, overarching marketing strategy has been developed to promote the centre and its services to the wider community. As part of this effort, all staff will be trained and knowledgeable “about all aspects of service provision”, with each organisation responsible for the running and operation of its own area inside the building.

She adds: “We often had GP referrals at our previous site, but the patient would never bother to make an appointment at the gym despite their membership being free. At the Grove Wellness Centre, a GP can actually call the gym and make the appointment for the patient in the same way that they might book them in to see a consultant.

“Similarly, a patient is able to visit the library and read more about a particular medical condition, or research on the website.”

Chris Johnson, managing director of Pulse, which provided much of the centre’s fitness equipment, says: “The concept of polyclinics is a relatively new one and is therefore quite exciting for the leisure industry. This is the first multi-functional site of its kind in Ireland and the first one that we at Pulse have been involved with.

“Although this may not ultimately be the right solution for every local authority, it will certainly increasingly be an agenda item in many of the early meetings we hold with our local authority partners.”

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