



Remote Access to Leisure Facilities

Many sports facilities and public halls require subsidy from their parent local authority to remain open. The income generated from sports like badminton or club sports like gymnastics is insufficient to cover the costs of maintaining staff at the facility. Continued budget pressures mean that local authorities have to become more innovative in finding solutions that maintains the public benefit of access to a community facility whilst significantly reducing the cost. This paper takes a look at some of the innovative options found by local authorities to open up under-utilised sports facilities.

Key issues

- Access to leisure facilities is often essential to many volunteer run sports clubs
- Technology offers low cost proven solutions to remote facility access
- Health and safety and insurance concerns are not prohibitive to access

Introduction

Many sports facilities often lie idle due to a perceived lack of interest or because the cost of staffing is disproportionate to the income received. Outdoor facilities like tennis courts and bowling greens require fencing to protect the surface but this also requires a locked gate with someone controlling access. Basing lone workers at remote sites is also often less than ideal. Many sports facilities built under the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme and facilities built with grants from National Sports Governing Bodies specifically require community access to be given, however this is often not achieved due to lack of will, perceived insurance and health and safety concerns or cost.

Bournemouth Tennis Courts

Bournemouth Council had a set of tennis courts in one of their parks. The courts were used sporadically but the cost of providing staffing to monitor the courts and take the bookings, far outweighed the income.

In collaboration with a local tennis club, the Council decided to operate an online booking system for court time, and offered unlimited tennis to any member of the public who pays a £30 yearly membership fee. The fee provides the member and their household with an access key fob and a website access code through which they can book courts. This provides certainty of court time and allows remote entry without the need for staff. In the first year several hundred

people took up the offer creating a significant income. The website can be viewed as www.playtennisinthepark.co.uk

The scheme has been so successful that it has now been extended to three sites and one allows token operated flood lighting for £2 an hour

Wrexham Dual Use Leisure centre

Wrexham Council had agreements with several schools in regard to 'out of hours' access to dual-use sports halls. To operate the sites required full-time staffing, sometimes operating alone and at significant cost. Faced with intense budget pressure, options to reduce opening hours drastically were considered along with handing the centres back to the schools.

The solution Wrexham found involved the installation of a simple camera access system to allow remote control of those entering the building. The facilities are hired out to bona-fide sports clubs who were required to hold their own insurance and are responsible for set-up and storage of equipment. The club usage does not require council employees to be on-site, removing a large cost and maintains community access to facilities that would otherwise be closed. A saving of £54k per year was achieved on a single site.

Equipment Costs

The Equipment for each installation was relatively inexpensive. A fob entry system including the encoder and software costs in the region of £2,500 and each fob less than £5. Bournemouth used a Salto GEO access system installed by a local security equipment company.

Bournemouth Council used the online booking module of their Gladstone Leisure management system, but other systems are readily available, providing web access booking from around £200 per year upwards.

Wrexham installed a remote access system with camera, monitored from another location. Whilst the technology then cost in the region of £6k, the cost has been falling rapidly. IP cameras that allow manipulation across the web and 640 x 480 pixel resolution can now cost under £50. Wireless versions exist if wifi is available removing the need for hardwiring.

APSE Comment

The benefits of being able to take part in physical exercise are well proven. The reduction in visits to the doctors, mental stress and the longer term benefits of reduced heart disease and weight related illness are substantial.

In many communities the availability of an outlet for youngsters to practice something constructive or simply let off excess energy as part of an organised sport has shown marked reductions in low level crime and disorder.

In a time when budget pressures are strong, in what is a discretionary area for local authorities, initiatives that can retain public access whilst relieving the cost burden are too be encouraged.

Remote access options along with engagement with voluntary sports groups are proven solutions and should be explored further.

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