
“Leisure Centres Review”

Report of Councillor Newcombe, Task Group Leader

1. Summary

1.1 This report provides the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board with the findings of the Culture and Leisure Task Groups review into the Leisure Centres provision in Leicester. This review was undertaken to carry out a review of the council’s Leisure Centres with a view to assess the buildings, the facilities and the services provided.

1.2 Leicester has one new Leisure Centre and others are of an older age which are in need of improved facilities and general refurbishment work. The majority of the centres were built in the 1970s and 1980s with Braunstone Leisure Centre, our flagship centre, being the most recent centre to be constructed in 2005.

1.3 This report sets out the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Leisure Centres Task Group.

2. Recommendations

The Overview and Scrutiny Management Board is asked to endorse the following recommendations of the Leisure Centres Task Group.

2.1 That the Sports Service Action Plan that has been drawn up in response to this report and its findings, be agreed, see Appendix A.

2.2 That Sports Services through the Health and Scrutiny Overview Committee continue work in partnership with the NHS to increase opportunities for leisure development and outreach work e.g. Health-related programmes and GP Exercise Referrals.

2.3 That the Sports Services through the Health and Scrutiny Overview Committee work in partnership with the NHS to promote healthier communities by finding ways of increasing the offer of fitness and activity programmes in the community e.g. Fit and Active Buddies as a model of good practice.
2.4. That consideration be given to long term investment programmes to bring outdated leisure centres up to modern day standards.

2.5. That the Sports and Leisure Service build closer links with BSF (Building Schools for the Future) programmes to create and develop new opportunities in sports and leisure offer in Leicester.

2.6. That corporate signage and branding be reviewed in order to adopt the ‘One Leicester’ image which is currently not visible in the appearance of our centres.

2.7. Landscaping improvements to be made in the area surrounding Leisure Centre buildings to make our centres more welcoming and improve the general appearance.

2.8. That the council further explores the options to address a gap in leisure provision in the East side of the city i.e. Humberstone / Hamilton area.

2.9. That an investment be made to improve buildings maintenance and the continuous upkeep of repairs and redecoration in our leisure centres, especially the changing rooms and shower facilities that are well used.

2.10. To invest in the Plant rooms swimming pools to ensure energy efficiency.

2.11. All centres to ensure that the lighting provision, internal and external, is energy efficient and to look at options to introduce more natural lighting into centres.

2.12. That investment was needed to address small pockets of access issues, in particular those affecting disabled users.

2.13. That the number of vending machines in each centre be reviewed to discourage unhealthy snacks and fizzy drinks.

2.14. To work in partnership with the museums service, local universities and schools to secure a variety of Artwork and visuals to decorate the bare brick walls that exist in leisure centres.

2.15. That the council should contact the Rating Valuation Agency to reduce the tariff as the non-domestic rates tariff in respect of leisure centres was not appropriate.
3. **Background**

3.1 At its meeting in July 2008 the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board agreed for the Culture & Leisure Task Group to undertake a review of Leisure Centres in Leicester.

3.2 The Task Group met on six occasions. In addition to these meetings the Task Group carried out site visits and consultations for the purpose of gathering evidence.

3.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Board have received regular progress reports on the work of the Task Group.

4. **Membership of the Task Group**

4.1 The members involved in the Task Group were: Councillors Newcombe (chair), Naylor, Shelton, Westley, Potter, Marriott, Mayat, Bajaj and Gill.

4.2 The officers from the Regeneration & Culture Department involved in this review are Paul Edwards – Head of Sports Service, and Edwin James – Area Sports Services Manager.

4.3 The Task Group co-opted Shelly Hillier from the Serco Leisure Group plc as an independent advisor.

5. **Acknowledgements**

5.1 The Task Group wishes to thank the officers involved in this review plus the Leisure centres staff in the city and in the county; the Forum for Older People; and the Schools who participated. The Task Group thanks the Sports Service for offering an incentive of £250 sports equipment voucher to each school who responded.

The Task Group also wishes to thank Shelly Hillier from the Leisure Serco Group plc for her contribution to the review which included joining the task group on their site visits. In recognition of this, the Task Group agreed to reimburse Shelly for her invaluable expert advice and travel expenses in the sum of £100 from the scrutiny budget.

6. **Aim of the Review**

6.1 The Leisure Centres Scrutiny Task Group was set up to:

   a) To assess the standard of the buildings
   b) To assess the quality of the facilities provided
   c) To assess the quality of the service provided
   d) To identify areas for future improvement
7. Method of investigation

7.1 To carry out this review we have used a range of methods:
- Site visits to leisure centres
- Focus groups
- A questionnaire survey to four schools
- Table top review of council documents
- Independent expert advice.

8. Findings

8.1 The task group received a presentation on the current service, its performance and satisfaction data. These are the main points:

a) Leicester City Council has a range of facilities both owned and managed by the City Council. For the purpose of this review, these include:
   • Braunstone Leisure Centre*
   • Aylestone Leisure Centre*
   • Leicester Leys Leisure Centre*
   • Evington Leisure Centre*
   • Cossington Street Sports Centre*
   • New Parks Leisure Centre*
   • Spence Street Sports Centre*

Facilities marked with an asterisk ‘*’ have been QUEST accredited (a UK quality scheme for sport and leisure) and other facilities will soon also go through a QUEST inspection.

The majority of centres have been QUEST inspected and accredited, with Leicester Leys, Aylestone and Braunstone scoring over 70% and Evington being classified as most improved. This nationally recognised quality scheme considers a wide range of management functions and is an exacting process.

b) In addition, Beacon status has been awarded for Culture and Sport meeting the needs of hard to reach groups, been awarded European City of Sport for the United Kingdom in 2008 and were awarded four stars for Culture and Sport in the recent CPA inspection.

c) User figures were in excess of 2.3 million users last year and received almost £5 million in income from customers to offset the expenditure levels.

d) Leicester this year is hosting the 2009 Special Olympics and two centres have been recognised as potential pre-training camps for the 2012 Olympic Games.

e) A number of centres require refurbishment to meet the ever-growing
aspirations of our customers, and despite continuous work over the past five years work continues to grow beyond our financial support.

f) Unlike some other local authorities, Leicester City Council has retained responsibility for the leisure centres which includes the buildings, management/maintenance, plant, and grounds maintenance, plus the pricing policy.

g) Financial performance is measured annually through the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) benchmarking service.

h) Sports Services offer facilities to a wide range of communities in the city
   - 61% of customers are city residents
   - 25% of customers are county residents
   - 14% of customers are outside the county
   - Over 50% of customers are of non-white ethnic groups.
   - Over 48% are white.
   - Over 51% of customers are male and over 48% are female.
   - 12% of customers are disabled.

i) Finally, over 70% of customers are very or fairly satisfied with the service, however, importantly, 17% are fairly or very dissatisfied. The service recognises that work must be done to reduce that figure.

j) Members heard that non-domestic rates were applied to leisure centres because of the tariff that had been applied by the Rating Valuation Agency. The Task Group heard that the service had been trying, without success for three years to obtain a reduction in rates and had argued that because of health benefits gained by users of the leisure centres, there was a good case to argue for a change in the tariff.

8.2 Investment into Leisure Centres
The task group heard information on recent investment into building new sports facilities and upgrading existing ones. Recently, £2 million pounds has been spent on new construction. The following is a summary of recent investment:

a) The £1.6 million sports hall development at Evington Leisure Centre was Completed in 2007. This centre now features a new four-court, multi-use sports hall and fully equipped fitness studio in a purpose-built extension. The new facilities also include changing areas and a refurbishment of the existing poolside changing rooms. The poolside has also been retiled. In addition, the centre has new offices, extended car parking provision and changing facilities, which are user friendly for people with disabilities.
b) **Aylestone Leisure Centre** has received a new open plan reception and a major redecoration of areas including a locker system for the pool changing rooms. The floor in the sports hall has been resealed. A fitness suite, including a free weights area was opened in 2006. A football pitch, 4x5 a-side, has been developed at Aylestone Recreation Ground to cater for the high demand of outdoor multi-sports activities and help to encourage more people than ever to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

c) The £350,000 revamp at **Leicester Leys Leisure Centre** involved installing new changing areas, new poolside disabled changing rooms and refurbished female foyer toilets. In addition, all corridors repainted, new carpets and a new swimming pool chlorination system installed.

d) Other improvements at **Leicester Leys Leisure Centre** have included refurbishment of the lifestyle fitness studios with brand new equipment giving the gym a fresh, modern look. A new open plan reception area has made the entrance more open and customer friendly and also gives better access to disabled customers. In addition the dry side changing rooms have been improved.

e) At **Cossington Street Leisure Centre**, almost a half of a million pounds has been spent on improving the pool, plant room and reception area. Refurbishment work included installing new changing areas and showers and improved lighting in the reception area. A new pool liner a new dehumidifier unit has been installed to improve the air quality for swimmers.

8.3 **Free Swims initiative for 16 and Under**

From April 1st 2009, all young people in Leicester aged 16 and under can swim for free in Leicester City Council owned pools. The initiative is part of the government’s free swimming scheme, which aims to provide free swimming for children and older people to encourage better health and improve fitness.

Initial assessments of take up of the scheme has shown that it is a success and user numbers have increased, especially in particular areas of the city e.g. Cossington and Spence Street.

8.4 **Site Visits**

8.4.1 For the purpose of this review, the task group visited the following seven Leicester City Leisure Centres:

1) Aylestone Leisure Centre
2) Leicester Leys Leisure Centre
3) Braunstone Leisure Centre
4) Cossington Leisure Centre
5) Evington Leisure Centre
6) New Parks Leisure Centre  
7) Spence Street Leisure Centre

The task group also visited the following two Leicestershire County Leisure Centres to provide a comparator of the service.

1) Loughborough Leisure Centre in Charnwood  
2) Soar Valley Leisure Centre in Mountsorrel

The Task Group stated that the managers and leisure centre staff both in the city and county sites were all friendly and very welcoming.

The full list of task group findings from the site visits have been attached to this report, See Appendix B.

This section (8.4.2 to 8.4.11) provides a summary of the observations from the Site Visits:

8.4.2 Swimming Pool and Poolside

At Braunstone the members found that the glass façade on the poolside was very eye-catching and felt that it had a wow factor to it.

Poolside finishes should be hard wearing, bright, easy to clean and be particularly slip resistant. At Aylestone the members were given an opportunity to re-visit the centre to view the newly re-furbished poolside area.

At Cossington Street the pool clarity was good, however the tiling on the poolside was in need of repair.

At Evington the poolside looked dated and the poolside seating would benefit from renewal plus extra seating provision.

8.4.3 Changing rooms and showers

The task group were impressed by the ‘changing village’ theme at Braunstone. This modern state of the art ‘changing village’ has been created to provide a much more customer friendly facility with new lockers, cubicles, toilets and showers fitted, including new group, family and disabled changing areas. It is an aspiration to have this type of facility in all our centres; however, it also recognises that it would require major long term investment schemes to implement.

Although the changing facilities at Cossington St. and B/leys have recently been refurbished, the task group were concerned that there were already some signs of deterioration.

At Evington the task group found the dry side changing area to be very modern and clean, but found the wet side changing area outdated and in need of modernisation.
The majority of changing areas and showers were well maintained and clean, but others were not well kept and some shower facilities were in need of attention.

The design of changing facilities is important as privacy is prized by many individuals and ethnic groups. People referred for health reasons, for example those trying to lose weight, generally prefer individual cubicles (of sufficient size) to open shared changing areas. Carers and parents, especially when assisting adults and children of the opposite sex, need family changing rooms.

8.4.4 Fitness Suite

It is necessary to provide a comfortable environment for users to work out in. The fitness suite should be a welcoming place to exercise with adequate air conditioning, privacy for users and audio-visual equipment.

The council has spent over £250,000 upgrading its Lifestyle Fitness Gym studios with brand new equipment at Aylestone, Evington, Leicester Leys and Braunstone giving the gyms a fresh, modern look.

Cllr Shelton stated that he used the Evington gym and that users were pleased with the facility, the gym was well used and was at capacity at peak times.

We need good facilities to encourage the local community to take part in regular physical activity.

8.4.5 Lockers and security

The Task Group recognise that it is necessary to provide a safe and secure environment for staff and visitors, but with the minimum possible impact on the openness and accessibility of the building.

The security of centres should ensure:
- Against unauthorised entry from the outside
- Against unauthorised access within the building
- Personal security and safety of staff working in the building
- Ease of operation

Lockers should be designed to:
- Provide adequate clothes storage
- Enable users direct access to lockers from all cubicles
- Provide ease of staff supervision to ensure security
- Be of a high quality and provide a high level of security.

The Task Group noted concerns raised relating to security issues e.g. security of lockers in Spence Street; lack of secure car parking provision in some centres and safety of staff working late evenings at Aylestone.
8.4.5 **External space around Leisure Centres**

The area surrounding leisure centres in terms of landscaping can create a welcoming route to the leisure centre plus good external lighting is necessary to provide security for customers and staff. At Leicester Leys the outside of the centre is impressive, but is hidden behind overgrown bushes and shrubs. Better use of the garden space surrounding the centre would make it more attractive.

Car parking provision is provided by some of our centres, where possible. However, the lack of car parking spaces, especially at busy times is an ongoing problem creating access and safety issues e.g. Cossington Street, Spence Street.

External signage was an issue in terms of visibility, consistency and image. The task group would suggest that corporate signage and branding of leisure centres be reviewed to give all our centres the new ‘One Leicester’ welcoming image.

8.4.6 **Buildings Maintenance**

The task group found that overall the buildings were maintained to a good standard. However, there were pockets of deterioration and redecorating issues in some centres that needed addressing.

At Spence Street and Evington the plain brick walls looked dull and outdated. These could do with an uplift, either by plastering, painting and/or additional artwork.

At Braunstone, some minor redecorating work was needed e.g. damaged walls and dryside changing area.

The County sites and the Braunstone centre impressed the task group in terms of visual images and artwork decorating the centres. The task group suggests that this model of good practice be used in our centres to redecorate some of the bare brick walls to create modern and interesting facilities.

8.4.7 **Lighting**

Natural lighting helps to create a spacious and welcoming environment for customers, plus, natural light is energy efficient and cost saving. Where artificial lighting is used, it should be energy efficient lighting. The task group suggests that all leisure centres explore options to increase natural lighting e.g. modelled on the county leisure centres and Evington reception foyer and which has lots of natural light.

8.4.9 **Reception / Entrance areas**

Entrance foyer areas should form the hub of the leisure centre from which customers can access all of the facilities. Reception areas should provide comfortable seating area for customers.
New, open plan reception areas at Aylestone, Leicester Leys and Evington are
more open plan, welcoming and customer friendly. They also give better
access to disabled customers. At Evington there was a good colour scheme
creating a modern and bright effect.

Cossington Street is a busy centre and is well used by local people and while
this demonstrates fantastic support from customers it also creates problems.
The task group recognises that major refurbishment work has recently taken
place at the centre including improved lighting in the reception area. However,
on visiting the centre it was clear that the entrance foyer was outdated with a
lack of seating and circulation space for customers especially at peak times
when the reception area struggles to cope with the numbers.

8.4.10 Modernisation

The Task Group heard that the following improvements would be taking place
in the following centres:
- Aylestone Leisure Centre: Re-tiling of the swimming pool at a cost of
  £92,000
- Leicester Leys: Sports Hall improvements at a cost of £15,000
- Braunstone Leisure Centre: Redecoration at a cost of £40,000

However, compared to other centres, the task group found that Cossington
Street, Spence Street and New Parks were in need of major investment for
remodelling, upgrades and new equipment to modernise. In addition to the
points mentioned in 8.4 relating to these centres, the members wish to
highlight the following issues identified:

i. Cossington Street, in terms of layout and floor space, e.g. staff office
   space appeared cramped and dull with no windows looking out. The
   sauna facilities were very well used, but very basic. There were some
disability access issues at this centre. Plus, it was felt that due to the
age of the building with an outdated sports/gym facility in a detached
building, the existing centre lacked visual appeal.

ii. Spence Street has great potential as it is a very popular centre,
especially with the Asian communities, however the building is old (from
the 70s) and outdated with the gym and sports hall detached from the
main building. It was also noted that there was a large amount of
wasted space, especially around the reception and foyer.

iii. New Parks centre would benefit from a major rethink in terms of the
layout, the reception area and the pool. The building is tired looking
and the gym is old and outdated. However, the centre has the potential
to make more use of existing space by adding more facilities and
making better use of the space upstairs e.g. dance studio,
physiotherapy rooms. The issue relating to a lift instalment is currently
being addressed.
8.4.11 Best Practice – Site visits in the county

The Task Group began their site visits by visiting Soar Valley and Loughborough Leisure Centres in the county. Members were impressed by the facilities at these centres and it was noted that their scores granted by QUEST (a UK quality scheme for sport and leisure) were very good. These centres were managed by a private company ‘Serco Group Plc’ on behalf of the local council. Members stated that these centres were outstanding and well managed, therefore provided a good benchmark from which to assess other centres.

The key findings of good practice are:

a) Entrance/reception areas were welcoming with excellent leaflet displays and well kept notice boards. Especially liked the wall hangings, artwork and decoration.

b) Pools and poolside had natural light coming through adding to the clean fresh feel of the area with pictures dotted around giving a relaxed atmosphere.

c) Spacious café area with good selection of healthy options, including freshly squeezed orange juice. Adjacent to the café area was a toddlers’ area with crèche facilities with a lending library.

d) Changing and shower facilities were well provided with a welcoming clean fresh atmosphere.

e) Particularly liked the health suite with sauna and steam room facilities.

f) Impressed with the youth activities offered e.g. Roller Disco every Saturday 7pm till 9pm for £2.70 and Pool Disco, evening sessions with food provided for £4.00.

g) The spacious gym was modern and well equipped.

h) Use of online booking system in the foyer area frees up staff for more involved face to face contact.

i) Positive advantage was the view to the pool from the foyer through a glass panel.

j) Leaflets were of a high quality with a corporate identity, well laid out in attractive display stands. Customer satisfaction and performance data was also displayed clearly on notice boards in the foyer area.

8.5 Consultation with Older People

All of Leicester City Council’s leisure centres offer activities for the over 50s. From swimming and badminton to armchair aerobics and a tea dance, there are lots of different ways for over 50s to keep fit, meet people and have fun

The task group carried out focus group exercise with the Forum for Older People to find out how they viewed the service. The following key issues were raised:

- Leisure Centre staff were praised as providing good a good customer service – rated 7 to 10 on average (out of 10)
• In general, the Leisure Centre service was rated good – 7 to 8 on average (out of 10)

• Grateful for free sessions offered to over 60s, but more can be done by city council to improve the leisure centre service.

• Transport can be an issue for some older people due to mobility/access issues.

• Gaps in service exist e.g. no leisure facilities in Humberstone/Hamilton, Knighton & Eyres Monsell.
• Better publicity needed to publicise activities.

• Schools should be made available for community use especially older people activities (long term action for education service to consider).

• Existing leisure centres should continue to build on the links with schools.

• Need more closed and private shower facilities e.g. Aylestone.

• Water Aerobics sessions is excellent, but oversubscribed at Leicester Leys – not enough space in the water at times.

• Water temperature can be an issue – too cold on occasions at Aylestone – stopped attending classes because of this.

• Medical referrals – city council need to offer this exercise classes service with tailored sessions for over 60s (As a matter of urgency this needs to be explored in partnership with the health service to develop future improvements). County model is better than ours on this service.

• Also to explore with health – procurement for preventative care classes.

• Links to explore with new NHS project ‘Frail & Elderly People’.

• Fit and Active buddies – to explore offering new classes for over 60s

• City council should be encouraging healthy eating and catering at affordable prices in leisure centres.

• Leisure Centres should provide café area with more lounge space with comfortable seating.

• Evington Centre has a well equipped gym which is well used, although this is housed in a dated mobile port cabin at the back of the main building.

• Cossington Street is overused and especially popular since the
introduction of free swims, therefore should be cleaned more regularly and made more presentable re: hygiene issues,

8.6 Consultation with Young People

The Task Group suggested that Sports Services should be proactive and work closer with BSF (Building Schools for the Future) Programmes which would lead to improved facilities in Leicester.

The task group carried out a questionnaire consultation with young people through 4 schools in the city. At the time of this report being written the responses from this consultation were still coming in, therefore the work on this task is to be continued. The results of this consultation will be reported once complete, estimated end of August 2009.

Once completed, the results of this consultation will be handed over to the Sports Service to analyse and take action, as necessary.

8.7 Consultation with Leisure Centre Staff

As a part of this review a focus group was held with leisure centre staff to gather their views and opinions on the service.

Staff were asked to give each centre a rating, out of 10, in terms of overall service, Table 1, below shows the scores:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEISURE CENTRE</th>
<th>In terms of overall service/quality – How would you rate your leisure centre <em>(marks out of 10)</em></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aylestone LC</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leicester Leys LC</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braunstone LC</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cossington LC</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evington LC</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Parks LC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spence Street LC</td>
<td>5</td>
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*Note: ratings between 1 to 10 (10 being the highest)*

Staff were also asked to give a score to rate Leicester City Council as an employer, the result of this score ranged from 7 to 10*. 

Key Issues raised by staff:

1) Cleanliness of changing rooms – to be improved
2) Shower facilities - to be improved
3) Air conditioning and drainage - to be improved
4) Refurbishment – should be ongoing
5) Maintenance and upkeep of centres
6) Security of staff - working late evenings
7) Security and lockers
8) Car Parking – lack of secure provision
9) Outdated buildings in need of attention
10) Unused space needs to be better utilised
11) Not enough natural light in centres
12) Advertising and branding could be improved
13) More income generation options to be explored
14) More partnership working to take place
15) More activities, clubs and playscheme programmes
16) Facilities for communal comfortable café areas is beneficial
17) Crèche facilities to be provided if necessary
18) Modernisation of Gym facilities
19) Modernisation of centres – general
20) Entrance and area surrounding centres to be more attractive
21) Limited resources in terms of budget – ongoing issue
22) Leisure Centre Staff Development, in terms of:
   • The development of staff should be encouraged and should include networking and training events to share experiences with other leisure centre staff in the city.
   • The communication links between the leisure centres should be improved.
   • The communication links between the management and the staff should be improved.
   • The career development opportunities, training and retention of staff should be encouraged.

8.8 Other Key findings

Members heard about various activities and classes that were being offered by the leisure centres. The ‘Fit & Active Buddies’ and ‘In 2 Shape’ run by Rob Melling were two of the fitness classes currently taking place at one specific Leisure Centre.

The task group agreed that these sessions should be rolled out across the city in other centres where appropriate and affordable.
8.9 Conclusion

The task group fully understands the need to refurbish existing leisure centres and continuously modernise the service, though resources are scarce – a position that many other local authorities find themselves in.

We have noted that in today’s culture, a leisure centre needs to be of the highest specification possible in order to attract customers. There is significant private competition where facilities are modern and attractive. Having recognised this, we also wish to highlight the fact that council-owned leisure centres are providing a public service and therefore have a very different approach to the private sector. This also means that the authority has a responsibility to provide leisure facilities in areas that may not be commercially attractive, but rather provide a social function. We recognise that we are catering for all residents of Leicester.

The task group wish to emphasise that closer links with health and wellbeing agendas is essential with a responsibility to provide opportunities to access sport and leisure for all.

9. Lessons learned for future reviews

The Task Group wish to highlight best practice experienced for future reviews:

a) In the use of an external expert advisor, who was able to provide independent guidance and advice on the service topic being reviewed.

b) In the hands-on approach adopted in conducting site visits and convening focus groups to gather evidence.

c) As a positive way of including young people through conducting a survey with a selection of schools and including older people through conducting a survey with the Forum for Older People.

10. Financial Implications

This report has financial implications for the Sports Service budget in Regeneration & Culture.

11. Legal Implications

None identified.
12. **CONTACT**

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13. **APPENDICES:**

Appendix A – Sports Service Action Plans
Appendix B - Site Visits Task Group Findings