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### The performance of local authority sports halls and swimming pools in England

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# The performance of local authority sports halls and swimming pools in England

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This paper reports on the results of a project from Sport England, which establishes performance indicators and national benchmarks for performance by local authority sports halls and swimming pools in England. These results act as a stark contrast to the limited representation of sports centres' performance in the UK government's main policy for local government 'Best Value'. The project uses an array of performance dimensions, covering access to centres by different user groups, the extent of utilization of facilities and financial performance. The results are structured by three 'families' of centres representing major influences on performance: type of centre; location of centre and size of centre. They demonstrate the validity and value of an extensive measurement of performance, even for such a specific service as sports centres.

## INTRODUCTION

Sports halls and swimming pools are an important part of local authority leisure provision in England and their contribution to sporting opportunities has been significant. UK Government legislation in the form of Best Value requires local authority leisure providers to demonstrate that they are running such facilities in a manner that ensures that the community receives effective, high quality services. An important part of this process will be to evaluate facility performance in terms of facility objectives and in comparison with others, both nationally and locally.

This paper presents the results of a research project funded by Sport England, the national government funded agency in England for the development of sport, to develop a framework of performance measurement for sports halls and swimming pools that allows national comparisons. After it outlines and explains the performance measurement framework, the paper then considers the 1997/98 performance of local authority sports halls and swimming

pools—the first nationally available evidence of its type in the UK.

## CONTEXT

In 1997, Labour came to power committed to the modernization of local government. Improving the quality of public services and the manner in which they are delivered is a key objective (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions [DETR], 1998). The principal means by which this happens is through a duty for local authorities to deliver 'Best Value' public services to citizens and from April 2000, the Best Value principles have been the main framework for the delivery of local authority services.

The procedures for delivering Best Value appear, on paper, relatively straightforward and are based on a rational planning approach. Firstly, local authorities have had to review performance at the corporate level, establishing corporate objectives, priorities and underpinning values (Sanderson, 1998a). From 2002 a requirement is for a Comprehensive Performance Assessment, across the

local authority's services. Secondly, using the corporate level framework, local authorities have had to carry out fundamental performance reviews, which are in-depth reviews of the services offered by the authority. Initially these had to be for all services over five years, but recently this was amended, with services for review selected by local authorities in line with their Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Finally, these fundamental performance reviews provide information for the formation of service strategies, which are published as Best Value performance plans and are subject to external audit and to inspection by the Audit Commission Inspection Service.

Fundamental performance reviews are expected, according to the Government, to:

- challenge why, how and by whom a service is being provided;
- secure comparison with the performance of others across a range of relevant indicators, taking into account the views of both service users and potential suppliers;
- consult local taxpayers, service users, partners and the wider business community in the setting of new performance targets;
- use fair and open competition wherever practicable as a means of securing efficient and effective services. (DETR, 1999)

Sanderson (1998a) outlined how the programme of Best Value is:

firmly rooted in the corporate planning process through which an authority identifies its objectives and priorities and the values that underpin them; and the action plans for performance improvements which result from the fundamental performance reviews must be integrated into broader processes and systems of service planning and performance management.

However, what may look fairly straightforward in principle is proving more difficult

in practice. The Audit Commission (2002) concluded in a review of its inspection reports for sport and recreation:

of the inspection reports analysed, nearly two-thirds include recommendations that relate directly to the need for better performance management systems. (p. 13)

a lack of robust performance management data is a major area of weakness in many sport and recreation services, even in some of the better performing authorities. (p. 39)

They listed a number of weaknesses, including 'no robust performance framework', 'performance indicators that fail to measure key outcomes', 'inconsistent, imprecise or ambiguous definitions of what data actually means', 'lack of robust baseline data ... which means little or no capacity to measure or analyse performance over time' and 'lack of comparison of performance, either across services or with other authorities or partners' (Audit Commission, 2002, p. 14). The Sport England performance measurement system outlined below is designed to overcome such weaknesses.

### COMPARISON OF LOCAL AUTHORITY SERVICE PERFORMANCE

When introducing Best Value, the Department of Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR, 1998, p. 19) acknowledged that local authority experience of using performance indicators had been mixed, both local and nationally, but went on to argue that there was a 'strong case for prescribing some indicators nationally, so as to enable comparison between authorities to be made on a common and consistent basis'. The Best Value legislation requires local authorities to compare their current and prospective performance against other public sector bodies and those in the private and voluntary sectors.

As a result, comparison of local authority performance is occurring in three ways.

Firstly, local authorities can compare current performance with past performance and then make plans for the future. Secondly, the Best Value legislation contains explicit reference to comparison of outcomes on a national basis. Finally, the requirement to meet this target and to improve service quality will require like for like comparison, through the process of benchmarking, with organizations, which demonstrate best practice.

Integral to performance comparison is performance measurement. The most common method of measuring performance is through the use of performance indicators, which are empirical measures that represent the performance of one or more organizations. Performance indicator scores for a facility or service can be compared over time for the same organization(s) or compared with other similar organizations (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). It is clear that performance measurement and thus performance indicators have a significant role to play in contemporary local authorities, as they seek to deliver Best Value.

Concern with the management and measurement of performance within local authorities is not, however, a recent phenomenon. The Audit Commission released a series of documents and papers between 1986 and 1988 in which it was argued that, in order to respond to the need for greater accountability and spending restraint, local government needed to introduce a comprehensive system of performance review. This belief was most clearly evident in the report *Performance Review In Local Government* released by the Audit Commission (1988), which argued that local authorities should evaluate the effectiveness of their services, consider outcomes as well as inputs and monitor and review performance as a matter of course.

The importance of performance measurement within public leisure services was made clear within the seminal report *Sport for*

Whom, in which the Audit Commission (1989) criticized local authority leisure providers on several aspects of the management of their services. The Audit Commission (1989) noted that:

objectives are rarely quantified and success or failure in meeting objectives rarely measured or monitored. It is easy to 'move the goalposts' and explain any high deficit by invoking social objectives.

Thus the importance placed on performance measurement within Best Value reflects and reiterates the focus on 'performance' in legislation affecting local authorities that has been a recurring theme for the past two decades. What makes Best Value different, however, is that the management of performance through service review and measurement of operations has become a statutory requirement.

### PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

In his discussion of performance indicators, Craig (1995) notes that they have three key functions, which assist with the management of public services. Firstly, they provide data by which an organization can be judged. Secondly, by their very nature, performance indicators allow standards and targets to be generated, which tell people what to expect. Thirdly, they should be used as a management tool to alert managers to potential weaknesses and corrective actions, while conversely protecting successful aspects of the organization.

The use of performance indicators for performance evaluation is not without criticism, however, and Sanderson (1998b) has offered a comprehensive criticism of an over-reliance on the use of performance indicators, describing this approach to performance evaluation as typifying an 'instrumental rationality'. He argues that an over-reliance on performance indicators fails to deal with the complexity of local authority services, suggesting that the 'focus and

action of public service organizations can be distorted to the detriment of broader effectiveness in improving social welfare', by the use of performance indicators (Sanderson, 1998b). In addition, Sanderson outlined how excessive reliance on performance indicators can lead to those aspects of performance not covered by performance indicators being neglected in comparison with those aspects that can be measured. This concern was also noted by the DETR (1998), and by Craig (1995).

Nevertheless, performance measurement, in particular the use of quantitative performance indicators, is essential for the delivery of 'Best Value' local services. Firstly, this type of measurement provides the information that allows local authorities to respond to the 'how do you know what you do?' criticisms made by the Audit Commission for the past two decades. Secondly, performance indicators promote accountability by providing information which will enable communities to make informed judgements about their authority's performances. In addition, performance indicators will 'provide the basis for effective action to secure real improvement' by providing information on the ways in which performance is 'good' or 'bad' (Sanderson, 1998b).

Finally, and most importantly, the data generated by the use of performance indicators provides a starting point for performance comparison (Craig, 1995; DETR, 1998; Elcock, 1996; Tonge and Horton, 1996), which is fundamental to Best Value. The information from performance indicators should, however, be used as a guide to performance, not as the explanation of performance (DETR, 1998; Rogers, 1990; Tonge and Horton, 1996). In the context of Best Value the explanation of performance will be contained in local performance plans.

### NATIONAL COMPARISON

National comparison of performance is required by the Best Value legislation and

indeed, research carried out by Nichols and Robinson (2000) with a sample of the Best Value pilots in leisure services, found that national comparison was considered to be desirable. However, one of the limitations of performance indicators noted by Craig (1995) is their ability to be misleading and demotivating when used for comparison against dissimilar organizations, or against organizations with dissimilar customer profiles. One of the key issues therefore surrounding performance measurement within Best Value, and a main finding of the Nichols and Robinson (2000) research, is the identification of appropriate 'like with like' comparators (Taylor *et al.*, 2000).

The national government and Audit Commission have set statutory performance indicators for national comparison although, despite consultation, these national indicators have been criticized. Tichelar (1998) found that the statutory indicators were considered to be of only passing relevance, as they were not seen to have much meaning to those involved 'at a local level in the delivery and consumption of services'. There is similar concern among leisure practitioners that the statutory national indicators for leisure are inadequate (Davies and Girdler, 2000; Nichols and Robinson, 2000) as they do not provide a comprehensive assessment of performance or a framework for comparison.

Local authority sports facilities are particularly poorly served in the national performance indicators (DETR and Audit Commission, 1999). Of the seven Best Value Performance Indicators in 2000/01 representing 'key national interest issues' relevant to Cultural and Related Services, two were relevant to sports halls and swimming pools. However, both of these incorporated sports facilities under generic titles of cultural and recreational facilities and activities. (See BV116 and BV119 in Table 1.)

The remaining 2000/01 performance indicators in Table 1 were Audit Commission

**Table 1** National performance indicators for sports halls and swimming pools 2000/01

|               |                                                                                                                |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BV116</b>  | Spend per head of population on cultural and recreational facilities.                                          |
| <b>BV119</b>  | Percentage of residents by targeted group satisfied with the authority's cultural and recreational activities. |
| <b>I1</b> (a) | The number of swims and other visits per 1000 populations.                                                     |
| (b)           | The net cost per swim/visit.                                                                                   |
| <b>I3</b>     | The number of sports pitches available to the public.                                                          |
| <b>I4</b>     | Total net spending per head on sport and recreation and parks and open spaces.                                 |

Source: DETR and Audit Commission (1999)

performance indicators, reflecting 'other areas where there is a need for further national and local performance information' (DETR and Audit Commission, 1999). Out of 23 Audit Commission performance indicators for cultural and recreational services (including sub-categories of the listed performance indicators), just four related to sports facilities in some way. One of these (I3 in Table 1) was a measure of input, which is the poorest type of performance indicator. Another was a measure of throughput related to local authority population (I1a), which is a measure of service effectiveness. The other two performance indicators (I1b and I4) were measures of net expenditure (or subsidy) per visit or per head of population, which may be interpreted as efficiency performance indicators. I4, though, again relates to the whole of 'sport and recreation and parks and open spaces' as a block.

From 2001/02, the Audit Commission performance indicators were phased out, as part of a quest by government 'to reduce the performance information requirements upon Best Value authorities' (DETR and Audit Commission, 2000). For sport this meant dropping I1a and b, I3 and I4 in Table 1. Only one new national performance indicator relevant to sport is proposed, for 2003/04 onwards (DETR, 2001). This is BVPI 167: 'per-

centage of residents who have participated in a local sporting activity or event, or have attended a local sporting facility in the last three months or in the last year'; a very general participation measure which, on the face of it, is not even specific to local authority services.

Local authority sports halls and swimming pools are important elements of public sector sporting provision, responsible in the mid-1990s for 39% of total net expenditure on sport<sup>1</sup> by local authorities (CIPFA, 1997). The national performance indicators do not allow public leisure providers to demonstrate the effective or efficient management of their sports halls and swimming pools.

The inadequacy of the national indicators as a means of comparing sports facilities' performance, both within local authorities and between local authorities, highlights the need for national agencies to become involved in the development of a framework for performance measurement and comparison. Thus the research aims to address the weakness of the national performance indicators. Associated with national comparison is the use of benchmarks, which can be defined as 'a value for a performance indicator, which is a reference point for comparisons' (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). It could be a performance indicator value for a particular facility at a specific time, against which future performance is compared, or a value for a group of similar organizations, so that an individual organization can compare itself with the norm for such organizations. Within Best Value the intention is that both types of benchmark will be used, as the national government and Audit Commission have stated that comparison with other authorities is necessary to set quality targets that are, as a minimum, consistent with the performance of the top 25% of all authorities; and cost and efficiency targets over 5 years that, as a minimum, are consistent with the performance of the top 25% of authorities and consistent with the overall target of 2% per

annum efficiency improvement set for local government as a whole (DETR, 1998).

The second of these requirements means, for example, that in 2003 authorities should be achieving the performance of the top 25% of services in 1998. The success of Best Value relies heavily on performance measurement and comparison and, as a result, it is important that the process adopted by local authorities is relevant, comprehensive and valid. It is clear that there are concerns about an over-reliance on performance indicators in the management of local authority services. However, it is also clear that the use of quantitative performance measures allows local authorities to become accountable to their communities and to compare performance against others. The research discussed below presents a framework of performance measurement which is based on reliable data, provides for 'like for like' comparison and is comprehensive in its consideration of aspects of performance.

### THE SPORT ENGLAND METHODOLOGY

The Sport England research project used the following data:

- A user survey at 155 centres, conducted by Public Attitude Surveys on behalf of Sport England in November 1997. The survey was carried out over seven days at each centre using an interviewer-led questionnaire. The questionnaire included consideration of the purpose of visit, the frequency of visit, use of other facilities, journey details, use of concessions and the social characteristics of the user. In total, over 41,000 people took part in the survey.
- Programming data for all the facilities: centre managers recorded details of pre-booked and casual utilization each day of the survey. Recorded information included the type of activity, the extent and type of usage and reasons for non-utilization.

- Financial information was generated by a survey of the same 155 centres, although responses from only 98 centres were received. Managers were asked for information about revenue, expenditure, cost recovery and subsidy.
- Catchment population profiles, using National Census data, were provided by Planning Data Management Services of Edinburgh University. A standard catchment area was used for each centre, defined as a 15-minute drive time.

These data were used to construct 'families' of centres for comparison: identify an array of performance indicators and to estimate national benchmark scores for these performance indicators. The research focused specifically on sports halls and swimming pools. It did not consider outdoor facilities that were independent of such centres; outreach services, such as sports development, when they were independent of sports halls and swimming pools; nor sports halls and swimming pools that had minimal community use (e.g. school facilities used mainly by the school).

Two principal methods were employed in the research project. The first of these was statistical testing of a variety of possibly useful families and performance indicators, using SPSS software to analyse, separately and jointly, the different datasets. The second method involved regular consultative meetings with Sport England's Best Value Sounding Board, a group of industry experts including centre managers and local authorities' officers as well as representatives from relevant professional bodies.

### THE FRAMEWORK OF FAMILIES, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND BENCHMARKS

One of the results of this research process was the development of a framework for performance measurement and comparison,

for sports halls and swimming pools. This has the following features.

### Families

Although a variety of families were tested, including a composite framework, three families were selected as being most valuable because performance of one type or another varied systematically with these variables. They are:

- facility type: a five-way categorization of facility type was chosen: wet; dry with outdoor facilities; dry without outdoor facilities; mixed (i.e. wet and dry) with outdoor facilities; mixed without outdoor facilities.
- location type: a three-way categorization of location type was chosen. Percentage of centre catchment area population in DE social classes: <15%; 15% to <20% and 20%+. These thresholds are pragmatic to ensure an even distribution of the centres across the three categories. Social classes DE were felt to be representative of an array of social exclusion characteristics. They are the two lowest categories in a socioeconomic classification used in the UK, with D indicated semi-skilled manual employment and E being unskilled manual employment. Catchment area socioeconomics discriminated the performance of centres much more clearly than broader locations such as local authority or regional characteristics; and consultations with industry representatives revealed a strong preference for the location type family to be as relevant as possible to the individual centre.
- size of centre: a three way categorization of the internal floor space of centres was chosen. <1500 square metres, 1500 to <3,000 square metres and 3,000+ square metres. Again, pragmatic thresholds ensure even distribution of the centres across the three categories.

### Performance indicators

There are several factors that need to be taken into consideration when devising or using performance indicators for management or comparative use. Firstly, the data upon which performance indicators are based must be trusted and in order for comparative performance indicators to be considered valid, clear instructions on data collection procedures need to be developed and adopted. For example, in the Sport England research the data collection protocols were clearly described. Secondly, performance indicators must measure what they claim to measure, of particular concern to Sanderson (1998). For example, when measuring access to leisure facilities by target groups, it is not enough simply to count visit numbers, but these need to be put in the perspective of the total visits, or the catchment population, or preferably both. Thirdly, the people using performance indicators must believe that they are valuable and therefore they should be devised in consultation with those who will be responsible for their use. This was evident in the Tichelar (1998) research and was the rationale for the consultation processes carried out in this research. Thus the main criteria for the selection of performance indicators were:

- it is relatively easy to interpret differences or changes in the performance indicator benchmarks;
- they are relevant to policy and management of sports facilities generally;
- they embrace as wide a variety of performance dimensions as is feasible;
- predominantly, they concern outputs rather than inputs.

The chosen Performance indicators fall into three groups. First is access, representing the extent to which facilities are used by different groups of users, particularly disadvantaged groups. Second is financial, representing subsidy, expenditure and income performance. Finally is utilization, representing the scale of

the use and non-use of facilities. In the subsequent National Benchmarking Service a fourth category of performance indicators was added. This was facility users' scores for the importance of, and their satisfaction with an array of service attributes. However, these were not contained in the original research and so they are not reported in this paper.

### Benchmarks

For each performance indicator the benchmarks employed are at the 25%, 50% and 75% points in the distribution of scores. They therefore represent scores for the individual centres at the quarter, half and three-quarters marks when all centres are placed in order of performance according to the indicator. This reporting is consistent with Audit Commission procedures. The 50% benchmark is the median rather than the mean, because it is often the case that the distribution of scores is skewed or includes unusually high or low scores, which influences the mean.

## SPORT ENGLAND RESULTS

It is important to use consistent terminology in analysing the results of the performance measurement in the Sport England report (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). The terms used are:

- 'Family influences': i.e. the type of centre, the socioeconomics of the catchment areas, and the size of centre.
- 'Performance dimensions': i.e. access, utilization and financial performance.
- 'Benchmark levels': i.e. 25%, 50% and 75% levels of performance.

After a brief examination of the benchmark scores for a number of performance indicators, the analysis of performance in local authority sports halls and swimming pools was structured by the performance dimensions, with commentary on the family influences on each performance dimension in turn. For clarity, this analysis is made with

primary reference to the 50% (median) benchmark scores of a selection of performance indicators.

The analysis of performance focuses on linking different performance indicator benchmark scores together to present a composite picture of the performance of local authority sports centres and swimming pools in 1997/8. In doing so, it is the main function of the analysis to rationalize the links between different performance indicators and offer some reasoning for the outcomes. However, it is not possible to determine the reasons for differences in performances beyond the data covered by the Sport England performance measurement project. For example, it is possible to explain a high subsidy by examination of expenditure, income and utilization performance indicator scores, but it is not possible to associate the high subsidy with different management policies such as pricing or programming, because the data does not extend that far.

One important consequence of the analysis therefore, is that it raises as many questions as answers. This is not perceived as a problem, but rather as a merit of the project, and it draws attention to important and specific research questions. At the micro level, an individual centre manager would enquire why their centre has particular scores for the performance indicators, why the scores are worse or better than similar centres elsewhere, and particularly how better scoring centres have succeeded in achieving their better scores. At the macro level, which is the concern of this paper, equivalent research questions emerge concerning the detailed reasons for performance across an array of local authority sports halls and swimming pools. Such questions are informed by evidence, they focus subsequent analysis, and they will hopefully lead to a more general discussion of policies and practices in these centres. The latter discussion, however, is beyond the remit of this

paper, which concentrates on making the empirical patterns of performance clear.

Officers at Sport England are aware that the results reported by Taylor *et al.* (2000) are the empirical basis for a continuing, informed discussion of what causes better performance. Recently they have implemented an agency function to facilitate process networking: i.e. putting individual centres which are clients of the National Benchmarking Service in touch with centres in the top 25% performance scores for particular performance indicators, in order for the former to identify how the top 25% performance was achieved.

#### Benchmark results from all centres 1997/8

Table 2 demonstrates the degree of difference between the three benchmark levels recorded in the Sport England project, for a

selection of performance indicators across all three performance dimensions. The degree of variation between the different benchmark levels demonstrates what is feasible in setting targets for improvement.

The access indicators in Table 2 are representativeness ratios (per cent of visits from a specific segment of users ÷ per cent of catchment population of this type). For one of the market segments in Table 2, 11–19 years, reaching representativeness in visits was not difficult in 1997/8. However, the comparative difficulty of attracting other market segments is reflected in the preponderance of benchmark values of less than 1 for 60+, DE social groups and ethnic minorities. The widest variation in access performance was for ethnic minorities, with the 25% benchmark at 0.4 and the 75% benchmark at 1.3. Clearly achieving visits by ethnic

**Table 2** 25%, 50% and 75% benchmarks scores for all centres, selected performance indicators, 1997/8

| Selected performance indicators                   | For all centres |               |               |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|
|                                                   | 25% benchmark   | 50% benchmark | 75% benchmark |
| <b>Access performance indicators</b>              |                 |               |               |
| 11–19 representativeness <sup>1</sup>             | 0.9             | 1.3           | 1.8           |
| 60+ representativeness <sup>1</sup>               | 0.3             | 0.5           | 0.7           |
| DE representativeness <sup>1</sup>                | 0.2             | 0.4           | 0.6           |
| Ethnic minorities representativeness <sup>1</sup> | 0.4             | 0.8           | 1.3           |
| <b>Utilization performance indicators</b>         |                 |               |               |
| Annual visits per square metre                    | 43              | 80            | 116           |
| % programme time available but not used           | 10              | 0.5           | 0             |
| <b>Financial performance indicators</b>           |                 |               |               |
| % cost recovery                                   | 52              | 72            | 92            |
| Subsidy per visit (£) <sup>2</sup>                | 1.33            | 0.65          | 0.19          |
| Subsidy per square metre (£) <sup>2</sup>         | 114             | 48            | 13            |
| Income per visit (£)                              | 1.14            | 1.54          | 1.96          |
| Income per square metre (£)                       | 75              | 116           | 178           |
| Operating cost per visit (£)                      | 2.98            | 2.47          | 1.83          |
| Operating cost per square metre (£)               | 262             | 189           | 125           |

Notes: 1. These indicators are measured by 'representativeness ratios' = % of visits ÷ % of catchment population for each group.

2. The benchmark scores for subsidy per visit and subsidy per square metre are not the simple product of the relevant income and cost benchmarks, because each benchmark is the score for a different centre at relevant points in the distribution of centres' scores.

minorities that are representative of their numbers in the catchment population is feasible, but to do so from a position in the bottom quarter of centres is a difficult objective. On the other hand, achieving representativeness for social classes DE is not likely to be feasible, for whatever reasons, and even a minor shift in a centre's score for this representativeness ratio is a significant improvement.

In the case of utilization performance, the degree of utilization in terms of throughput numbers and underutilization of programme time both varied considerably between the 25% and 75% benchmark levels in 1997/8. It is likely that the off-peak problem is of importance in explaining this variation. The 75% performance achievements do demonstrate, however, that the off-peak problem is not immutable.

Financial performance also demonstrates considerable variation in performance between the 25% and 75% benchmark levels in 1997/8. Centres at the 25% benchmarks only covered just over half their operational costs, yet centres at the 75% benchmark level almost broke even. Some centres within

the top quartile achieved operational surpluses, particularly larger centres.

The considerable differences between 25% and 75% benchmark levels for both utilization and financial performance dimensions calls into question the feasibility of all centres moving to these 75% benchmark levels within 5 years, which would be consistent with declared government targets. The sheer magnitude of the task for those centres at or below the 25% level is enough to raise the question. The same issue arises when the disaggregated performance data is examined. The difference between the 25% and 75% benchmark scores is often greater within the family categories than the differences in Table 2. Exploration of the reasons for the differences is important in reaching a valid and feasible set of targets for local authority sports halls and swimming pools.

### Access performance

Clear differences are apparent in access performance as a result of the three family influences. Table 3 summarizes the categories within each family influence, which achieved the best median (50%) benchmark

**Table 3** Access performance: best median benchmarks

| Access performance indicators                    | Best performing type of centre | Best performing catchment area | Best performing size of centre |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 11–19 years <sup>1</sup>                         | Dry without outdoor            | High DE                        | Small                          |
| 60+ years <sup>1</sup>                           | Wet                            | High DE                        | *                              |
| DE social groups <sup>1</sup>                    | Mixed without outdoor          | High DE                        | Large                          |
| Ethnic minorities <sup>1</sup>                   | Dry without outdoor            | *                              | Large                          |
| Females <sup>2</sup>                             | Wet                            | Low DE                         | Small                          |
| Disabled <60 years <sup>2</sup>                  | Wet                            | High DE                        | Small                          |
| Disabled 60+ years <sup>2</sup>                  | Wet                            | High DE                        | Medium                         |
| Unemployed <sup>2</sup>                          | Mixed without outdoor          | High DE                        | Large                          |
| Disadvantaged discount card users <sup>2,3</sup> | Wet                            | High DE                        | Medium                         |

Notes: \*No single group has better performance.

1. These indicators are measured by 'representativeness ratios' = % of visits ÷ % of catchment population for each group.

2. These indicators are measured by % of visits for each group.

3. 'Disadvantaged' discount card users are identified by eligibility for the cards under at least one of the following criteria: over 50 years; student; unemployed; disabled; single parent; income support/family credit; YTS trainee; widow; GP referral; elite performer.

scores in 1997/8 for each performance indicator shown.

The first four access performance indicators in Table 3 are measured by representativeness ratios. For the other four performance indicators in the table representativeness ratios were either not appropriate or not calculable, so performance is measured more simply by percentage of visits.

Swimming pools were conspicuously successful compared with other types of centres in attracting some access market segments, i.e. 60+ years, females, disabled, and 'disadvantaged' discount card users. However, for social groups DE, swimming pools performed poorly at the 50% benchmark level relative to other types, and mixed (i.e. wet and dry) centres without outdoor facilities performed better than other types of centre. The weakest access performance at the 50% benchmark level was most often found in dry centres with outdoor facilities: i.e. for 60+ years, females, disabled, unemployed and disadvantaged discount card users.

There is a systematic pattern to the variation in access performance by catchment area socioeconomics. For all but two of the nine selected access performance indicators in Table 3, the higher the percentage of social classes DE in the catchment population, the better the access performance for disadvantaged market segments by sports centres and swimming pools. The better performance of centres in high DE catchment areas applied to both kinds of access performance indicators. For those measuring percentage of visits, i.e. the disabled, the unemployed and disadvantaged discount card users, a higher score would be expected because of the greater numbers of disadvantaged people in high DE areas. This is a statistical reason and therefore it remains unproven whether or not it was the centres' policies that were successful in attracting these segments.

However the better performance for high

DE areas also applies for three of the performance indicators using the representativeness ratio (percentage of visits ÷ percentage of catchment population), i.e. for 11–19 years, 60+ years, and DE social groups. In these latter cases the relatively high numbers of people in these market segments represent a greater challenge for centres trying to be representative of their local communities, yet they achieved a slightly better representativeness ratio score than centres in areas with less DE people. This performance may well result from particular policies and initiatives to attract these segments into the centres. However, the better performance gives no reason for complacency. Table 2 reminds us that even at the 75% benchmark level, absolute representativeness (a score equal to or greater than 1, where percentage of visits = percentage of catchment population) was not achieved.

The two exceptions to this general finding concern females and ethnic minorities. Females were much better represented in centres in low DE areas, suggesting that the successes in attracting females to sports centres in England may be biased socio-economically. For ethnic minorities the centres in high DE areas performed slightly below the score of centres in lower DE areas. Size of centre has a varied impact on access performance, as demonstrated by the final column in Table 3. The variation across size of centre for most of the access performance indicators is not very great and is less than for the other two family influences.

### Utilization performance

Two of the most important utilization indicators in the Sport England results are annual visits per square metre, a throughput measure of utilization, and the percentage of programme time that is available but not used, a measure of underutilization. A summary of the family influences on these two performance indicators in 1997/8 is shown

**Table 4** Utilization performance: best median benchmarks

| Utilization Performance indicators                  | Best performing type of centre | Best performing catchment area | Best performing size of centre |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Annual visits per square metre                      | Mixed with outdoor             | Low DE                         | Small                          |
| % of programmed time available for use but not used | Wet                            | *                              | Medium                         |

Notes: \*No single group has better performance.

in Table 4. There was a significant variation in utilization performance by type of centre. In particular, wet centres had lower underutilization than dry centres, with mixed centres in the middle. The low underutilization in swimming pools was probably influenced beneficially by off-peak use by a number of market segments identified as having high access scores in Table 2, e.g. 60+, disabled, disadvantaged discount card users. However, the absolute numbers of such users was unlikely to be high, so they did not necessarily influence utilization performance substantially. Utilization performance as represented by annual visits per square metre was highest in mixed centres with outdoor facilities, and second highest in wet centres. Dry centres had clearly the lowest annual visits per square metre, possibly indicating a more severe off-peak problem.

The most conspicuous variation in utilization performance by social class DE was that

annual visits per square metre in the lowest DE areas were over twice the performance of the centres in the highest DE areas. In terms of the influence of size of centre on utilization performance, medium sized centres scored the best on underutilization performance and smaller centres performed well on visits per square metre. Larger centres performed the poorest on both underutilization and visits per square metre.

### Financial performance

Regarding financial performance in 1997/8, Table 5 reports clear 'winners' in all three family influences, for selected performance indicators covering subsidy, income and expenditure.

Mixed centres with outdoor facilities were the best performing type of centre at the 50% benchmark level, having the highest cost recovery and the lowest subsidy performance. This financial performance would appear to be derived from substantially

**Table 5** Financial performance: best median benchmarks

| Financial Performance indicators                 | Best performing type of centre | Best performing catchment area | Best performing size of centre |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| % cost recovery                                  | Mixed with outdoor             | Low DE                         | Large                          |
| Annual subsidy per visit (£)                     | Mixed with outdoor             | Low DE                         | Large                          |
| Annual subsidy per square metre (£)              | Mixed with outdoor             | Low DE                         | Large                          |
| Annual total earned income per visit (£)         | Dry with outdoor               | Low DE                         | Small                          |
| Annual total earned income per square metre (£)  | Wet                            | Low DE                         | Small                          |
| Annual total operating cost per visit (£)        | Mixed with outdoor             | Low DE                         | Large                          |
| Annual total operating cost per square metre (£) | Dry without outdoor            | Medium DE                      | Large                          |

lower total operating cost per visit in comparison with other types of centre, and also the highest visits per square metre (see Table 4). Dry centres without outdoor facilities had the lowest cost recovery and highest subsidy per visit. This is inevitable given that they had the highest total operating cost per visit, earned the lowest total income per visit and attracted the lowest visits per square metre compared with other types of centre. However, it should be noted that these centres had substantially improved relative performance at the 75% benchmark level, where they had the highest cost recovery (150%) and the highest visits per square metre. This demonstrates that significant improvement from the 50% benchmark level was possible. One key to improving financial performance in such centres would seem to lie in increasing utilization, since their total operating cost per square metre was low compared with other types of centre, so it was the utilization and income combination which was deficient at the 50% level.

In 1997/8 there was a strong relationship between financial performance and the socioeconomics of the centres' catchment areas. Centres in the lowest DE areas had the highest cost recovery, the lowest subsidy performance, the highest income performance, and the lowest annual total operating cost per visit, at the median benchmark levels. A particularly strong income performance is to be expected, given the greater ability to pay in low DE areas, reflected in high income per visit.

The generally weak financial performance (at the 50% benchmark level) of centres in high DE areas was caused by two factors. First they had low income per visit, reflecting either low prices generally or high use by visitors benefiting from price discounts (the evidence of Table 3 supports the latter). Second, such centres had relatively weak utilization performance. In contrast to the evidence at the 50% benchmark level, at the 75% benchmark level (not reported in the

tables) there was relatively high direct income per visit for centres in the high DE areas. This suggests that when financial pressures require it, average prices rise to relatively high levels even in high DE areas.

There was a strong relationship between financial performance and size of centre, shown in Table 5 for the 50% benchmark levels. This relationship demonstrates significant evidence of economies of scale, with larger centres achieving better cost recovery and subsidy benchmark scores in the main. This financial performance was driven largely by better cost performance, with costs per visit and costs per square metre being significantly lower in larger centres than in smaller centres. Income performance, on the other hand, was not better in larger centres.

The smallest centres had the best 50% benchmark scores for income per square metre (Table 5) and visits per square metre (Table 4). However, this strong income and utilization performance was not matched by cost performance, as their costs per square metre were over 60% higher than the largest centres.

It is clear from preceding analysis that what type, location and size of centre performs best varies according to the performance dimension studied. However, some generalizations can be made at the 50% benchmark level. Pools and mixed centres do relatively well on all three performance dimensions, whereas dry centres, with or without outdoor facilities, perform relatively badly. Centres in high DE areas generally perform better on access performance indicators than centres in low DE areas, partly because they have a greater number of disadvantaged people of various types to cater for, but the cost of this achievement is that they perform relatively poorly on utilization and financial performance indicators. Centres in low DE areas perform better on utilization and financial performance indicators. Large centres perform signifi-

cantly better on many financial performance indicators, largely because of economies of scale on costs. They perform marginally better on some access performance indicators, but worse on others; and they are relatively poor on utilization performance indicators. Small centres have some strengths, performing relatively well on some access performance indicators, on utilization, and on income performance. There are therefore no unambiguous 'winners' in respect of any of the family influence; but there is a case to make from the 1997/8 evidence that dry centres were relative 'losers' at the 50% benchmark level, across all three performance dimensions.

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the Sport England research help to identify the detailed parameters of performance within local authority sports halls and pools. They clearly endorse many of the positive reasons for performance measurement. The findings provide a comprehensive and objective set of reference points against which individual facility managers can compare. Moreover, there is sufficient scope in this array of performance indicators and benchmarks for individual facility managers to select those performance indicators which best represent their priorities and the appropriate benchmarks for their priorities and circumstances. This comprehensive choice framework of 35 performance indicators, each with three benchmarks, is important since the fewer the performance indicators, the less choice is available, and the more biased the system. A wider choice of performance indicators is less conducive to 'instrumental rationality', one of the dangers highlighted by Sanderson (1998b).

The Sport England results provide an empirical basis for the rational planning of service improvement. They give focus to this planning by highlighting strengths and weaknesses, in both absolute and comparative

senses. Furthermore, they enable facility managers to identify appropriate targets for their selected priority performance dimensions. Setting targets is little more than guesswork without either time series evidence of changes in performance over time for the individual facility, or evidence of the differences in performance between similar facilities. The Sport England results provide the latter, and because of the three benchmarks for each performance indicator they identify not only what is challenging but also what is feasible as a target for each performance indicator, an essential compromise to sustain motivation as well as encourage improvement.

The Sport England findings should also help to allay some of the fears expressed about performance measurement. One of principal fears identified in the earlier part of this paper is that performance objectives become distorted by what is measurable, at the cost of downgrading what is not measurable (Sanderson, 1998; Craig, 1995; DETR, 1998). The Sport England approach was driven by substantial data collected in their research exercise but this enabled a broad array of performance dimensions to be included. The principal omission in these dimensions was user satisfaction scores but this omission has been rectified in Sport England's subsequent National Benchmarking Service. In this, users are asked to score not only their satisfaction with an array of service characteristics, but also the importance of these characteristics to the quality of their visit.

However, there are other non-measurable dimensions to performance of sports halls and swimming pools that deserve some consideration here. In particular, cross-cutting objectives such as quality of life, health, and crime reduction are all in theory served by sports facilities and services, yet they are impacts which are not directly represented in the performance indicators estimated by the Sport England project. The Audit Com-

mission (2002) has suggested: 'A particular challenge for the service is measuring the impact of sport and recreation spend and activity' (p. 39).

Three points can be made in defence of the absence of such impacts from a national set of benchmarks for sports facilities. First, these impacts are multi-dimensional and difficult to measure at the best of times. On measurement grounds alone it could be suggested that they lie principally in the academic domain rather than practitioner domain. This raises serious questions about the practicality and consistency of using them in a widespread performance measurement system. Second, they are multivariate, the result of some influences within the policy ambit but many determinants beyond the influence of government. This means that even if they could be measured accurately and consistently, there are substantial difficulties in ascribing causal relationships between changes in discrete policies, such as sports services, and changes in these impacts. Again, this argument suggests that the empirical investigation of these causal relationships rests firmly in the academic rather than the practitioner domain. Third, if the relationship between on the one hand the impacts (such as health, quality of life and crime reduction), and on the other hand the intermediate outputs measured by the performance indicators used in the Sport England study (such as high utilization of facilities, and representative visiting by socially excluded target groups) are relatively constant, or at least not unpredictable, then it may be that the intermediate measures are reasonable proxies for the more ambitious but less measurable impacts. If this is the case, there is less reason to worry about the lack of the unmeasurable in the performance planning of facility managers, and these issues are implicit rather than missing. It must be acknowledged that this point is in need of much more empirical testing before it can be verified but, and here is the catch,

the first two points have hindered the achievement of satisfactory tests and much more empirical work is needed on these points too.

The main conclusion of this investigation of performance measurement in sports halls and swimming pools is therefore a very positive one. The study and its ensuing National Benchmarking Service, are an example of the merits of quantitative performance measurement, combining feasibility with comprehensiveness, breadth of coverage with choice and empirical focus with room for discussion. Above all it represents a relatively sophisticated approach, which takes performance measurement in sports facilities well beyond the rather simplistic level it has often been accused of in the past.

#### NOTE

1. The categories for 'sport' listed are swimming pools, sports centres, community centres and public halls, outdoor pitches, golf courses, parks and open spaces.

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