

funky facilities at newham

Time was when the best you could expect from local authority fitness centres was a warm up bike, a multi-gym and your own pin. Now you have leisure centres like Newham Council's at East Ham in London, funded by £13m of lottery money, equipped by Precor and managed by GLL (a non-profit distributing organisation), that is the equal of pretty much anything in the private sector.

"We have strong political leadership in Newham and, as a result, we tend to be a test bed for a lot of central government initiatives, which means that we get to pilot a lot of exciting projects, many of which are about addressing social exclusion," says Divisional Director of Leisure Services John Wood.

"One of the key factors that clinched the deal was talking to Precor's existing customers. Without exception, they all said that were pleased with both the product and the back-up service. We took the plunge with Precor and they have supported us ever since."

A model of contemporary design (all exposed brick, wood and metal – with a glass frontage that is straight out of *Homes & Gardens*), East Ham exceeded its pre-sale targets by almost 100%. Eight months on it is

bursting at the seams with 2,700 members paying £33 a month. That's £33 a month for an outstanding eighty-station gym, a pool to die for, an hour of free court time a week, a free crèche, free classes – need I go on?

The local leisure centre is often the first port of call for the newcomer to exercise, but I reckon that, in future, funky, value-for-money public facilities like East Ham will benefit from a downgrade of regular customers who are tired of paying eighty quid a month for no service (ed).

So, how did Precor get involved in the project? "We were looking for a supplier that had a good product, excellent service and a commitment to working in partnership with us," says John Wood. "Precor was chosen because they met our criteria; they were able to offer assistance to our design team - using CAD; they took the time to work with us to identify and resolve our problems and they offered an excellent product with flexible

payment terms. Above all, Precor has genuinely shown a willingness to work with us to provide an excellent new facility and market it too." says Wood.

Precor have always had a reputation as nice people to do business with, but that reputation counts for nothing if their products and services don't hold up in a high-pressure, commercial environment. But, as John Woods says:

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Just to give you an idea of what other operators in the area are up against let me walk you through a tour. East Ham is not London's most salubrious suburb (not yet anyway), so my expectations as I made the short walk through the town were not high-which





just goes to show what I know. As I turned the corner of the Town Hall, there in front of me was one of the sexiest pieces of architectural design I have seen in a long time. Once through the revolving glass doors my eye was drawn to the café area, which looks like it belongs in Covent Garden, not the East End.

The beautiful twenty-five metre, six-lane pool is a throw back to the days when pools were for swimming as opposed to splashing about in (reminds me of Australia. I wonder why they produce so many champions?). Then up the stairs to the gym which is right up there in terms of both design and equipment.

“This is a really comprehensive fit out that includes a full range of our cardiovascular and strength equipment,” says Precor’s Commercial Director, Rob Barker. “A few years ago, this kind of facility was the preserve of the private sector, but we are doing an increasing amount of work in partnership with local authorities who understand that if they are going to claim their share of the lucrative health and fitness market, they need to provide competitive facilities and services,” he adds.

Out of the gym and onto the climbing wall balcony (this is as close to the real thing as you get in London). Into the sports hall, which reflects the quality of fit out and the attention to architectural

detail that characterises the whole operation. Back up the stairs and across a mezzanine (the pool looks even better from above) we arrive at the aerobics studio and health, beauty and assessment suites.

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Then back down the stairs to meet the general manager, Tony Wallace, who is, not surprisingly, very proud of what has been achieved in this corner of London. “The response to this facility has been excellent; so much so that eight months in, we need more space. Fortunately, plans are afoot to extend the gym,” he says. “As far as Precor is concerned, the equipment has stood up extraordinarily well to the pounding and when we have had a problem the service has been excellent, which means that the downtime has been minimal and our customers are happy. Can’t ask for more than that,” says Wallace.

Since the launch of East Ham, Newham Council has started to



upgrade two of its other three facilities and Precor has been the preferred supplier in each case – which tells you something about the job they have done.

So, here’s the scoop. East Ham may be a one-off in design terms (although there is no reason why it should be) but, as dated local authority buildings and facilities come up for refurbishment, an increasing number of them will be seizing the opportunity to create something that will not just compete with private health clubs in terms of the environment they create but, because of the width of facilities they can offer and the prices they can charge, will beat them.

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