

lifestyle management in windsor

“Thirty years and more ago I used to spend my summers trying, largely unsuccessfully, to impress the girls at the old outdoor swimming pool in Windsor. In those days it was pretty rudimentary with air conditioning provided by a stiff south westerly breeze, but since then it has evolved into something altogether different.” Tim Webster returns home to take a look at Windsor Leisure Centre.

If you are still of the opinion that local authority leisure management trails in the wake of the private sector, I suggest you pay a visit to Windsor Leisure Centre. Set on the banks of the Thames, the facility is an outstanding example of what can be achieved when go-ahead public sector operators have the vision to embrace modern design and technology. But what impressed me most is the way the centre is being operated by the general manager, Jes Spencer, and his team.

Take their approach to selling memberships for example. Spencer eschews modern sales tactics in favour of a soft-sell – no dedicated salespeople armed with a hundred-and-one ways to close the customer here. Prospects are toured by duty managers and reception staff and then left to make their own informed decision. That’s it. It has to be said that Jes has an outstanding facility to work with (that kind of sells itself), but nevertheless this is a refreshing approach. “We have two thousand members, but a further forty per cent of our footfall is from casual users. Lots of hit and run sessions, which is

fine by me,” says Spencer, “everyone is equally important”. Membership costs £43 per month and that includes use of the outstanding pool facilities, spa and classes.

Maybe I’ve been looking in the wrong places, but over the last couple of years I have become increasingly disillusioned with the direction the industry is taking. Driven by the demands of men in suits who have little or no idea of what it takes to run a good health and fitness facility, it seems to me that we’ve lost sight of what it was we were trying to achieve in the first place. So, I have to say that what I saw in the Windsor fitness centre (Bodyzone) warmed the cockles of my heart.

Over the years I’ve spoken to shed loads of operators who have told me that customer service and programming in the fitness centre is their primary focus, only to find that when I get shown around the gym it is manned by some spotty youth whose bottom is seemingly glued to the desk, and populated by members looking as if watching paint dry would be an attractive alternative. Imagine my delight then when I entered Bodyzone to find three high-profile



instructors actively tending to the needs of an eclectic mix of members all looking pretty happy to be there. This is a big gym (130 pieces of largely Precor equipment), but at 11.30am on a Friday morning it was absolutely buzzing. That’s impressive.

Spencer elected to work with Precor for a number of reasons, not least their service, flexibility and response times: “The kit is reliable, easy to use and aesthetically pleasing, but it’s not just that, we have developed a really good working relationship with Precor over the years. They are knowledgeable, they respond to our needs quickly and they treat us with respect – that counts for a lot in my eyes.”

What strikes me immediately is the mixture of age groups: lots of young people happily working side-by-side with even more senior citizens. “We have focussed very hard on attracting older people,” says Spencer “and we have an extensive range of activities to cater for their needs. This is reflected in the fact that our usage is now spread much more evenly throughout the day – our figures suggest that peak to off peak usage is now 50/50.” As if





encouraging habitual health and life-long learning for the residents of the Royal Borough – as the strategy paper puts it. This is exactly what Eugene Milne is talking about in his article on page three.

Part of a broad-based approach to health and wellness in the community the Lifestyle Management scheme works in tandem with other Bodyzone programmes and includes: Goldies (50+

to reinforce the point, Jes leads me across to one of the studios where twenty-five or so, mainly older people, are engaged in a cardiac rehab class. The exuberance of one gentleman sporting a makeshift bandana on his balding pate symbolises the glad-to-be-here vitality of those who have looked death in the face and survived to tell the tale.

As Jes Spencer quite rightly points out, none of this happens by accident. He is quick to praise his fitness manager, Ian Gauldie, and the author of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Lifestyle Management Scheme, Kevin Johnson. In a nutshell the scheme is a roadmap that puts exercise and activity at the heart of an holistic approach to healthy living for at-risk groups in the community –

memberships), four walking schemes, stroke and cardiac rehabilitation classes, smoking cessation and a home exercise programme.

Anecdotal evidence from people like me is all well and good, but if we are going to position ourselves as genuine health care providers we need hard and fast evidence that all of this warm and cuddly stuff works. Well, the data collected from all three of the borough's centres between October 2002 and March 2003 shows that within an eight-week programme average blood pressure dropped from 138/81 to 127/80, average resting heart rate dropped from 73bpm to 66bpm and average weight reduced from 86.3kgs to 81.5kgs. There is space for 350 cardiac rehab clients in nineteen



classes per week, over 100 members completed Lifestyle MOTs (including cholesterol and glucose testing) and over 200 people took part in a Stroke Awareness Day.

Precor's National Sales Director, Jez Whitting, says: "The standard of facility and support Windsor provide is the benchmark that Precor aim to replicate with our complete health and fitness solution offered to Local Authorities. Through a single point of contact, we can provide hassle free project management from design and build to branding, staff development and beyond."

According to Windsor's Lifestyle Management Scheme report the government, health organisations and the media are facilitating an increased awareness of the benefits of healthy living and "we feel that the services offered through local leisure centres should be at the forefront of providing local residents with enhanced opportunities to improve their health and fitness levels." I reckon the residents of the Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead are in pretty good hands, don't you?



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