

Including poor people in leisure services without stigma: Leisure Cards in the UK.

Michael F Collins and Christopher Kennett. Institute for Sport and Leisure Policy, Loughborough University, UK, LE11 3TU.

1. Introduction: Poverty, Social Exclusion and leisure

One of the interests of the Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy is the outcome of policies of Sport for All which the Sports Council espoused from 1966 to 1995, and to which Mr Banks, the current Minister for Sport says he is committed. One live issue for the Government (DCMS, 1998) is that of social inclusion in most aspects of leisure including sport.

In 1993, Eurostat estimated that one-fifth of all children and one-sixth of all individuals in the EU lived in poverty, a total of 58 million people (CEC, 1993). In the UK, poverty levels (using the EU definition as people whose income is below half of the national average) have grown from 7% of the population in 1979, to 24% in 1992 (HMSO, 1995). This group failed to benefit from Thatcherite economics and inequality grew. Median wages grew by 35% in real terms and the top 10% of incomes by 50%, but in the same period, the wages of the bottom 10% fell by 18% (HMSO, 1995).

Recent years have seen increasing concern about the growth of poverty and social exclusion in Europe (Room et al, 1995 p1). This is emphasised by the European Commission's belief that "the (European) Community cannot be satisfied with a 'two-speed society' breeding...poverty, exclusion and frustration" (CEC, 1992 in Allen et al, 1998 p8). According to Allen et al, whether experiencing economic growth or decline overall, all major European cities are witnessing the symptoms of growing social exclusion" (1998 p7).

These symptoms include increasing long-term unemployment, male joblessness and the feminisation of an increasingly casual workforce, widening gaps in income levels, increasing disparities in educational and skill levels, deteriorating health and life expectancies for the poorest members of society. This exclusion is particularly evident in spatial terms amongst concentrations of immigrant and ethnic minorities (Allen et al, 1998). The balance of European employment has shifted from manufacturing to the service industries and has increased insecurity among large segments of the workforce through part-time, temporary and self-employed work. This has placed new pressures on households and communities in supporting their members.

There has been a shift away from the use of *absolute* 'poverty lines' - enough for basic food, clothes, shelter- based solely on income levels, to more wide reaching *relative* measures which define poverty in relation to the generally accepted standard of living in a specific society (Alcock, 1997). The term 'social exclusion' has become widespread in the EU, and Room et al (1993) provide one of the most widely accepted definitions, referring "to multidimensional disadvantage, which is of substantial duration and which involves dissociation from the major social and occupational milieux of society" (1993, p72). If the traditional concept of poverty is

restricted to absolute measures and specifically the lack of disposable income, poverty then becomes part of- a specific form of- the comprehensive concept of social exclusion (Berghman, 1998).

Townsend (1979) had already recognised the need to include leisure activities in the definition of poverty because "deprivation can arise in different spheres of life, such as in work, at home, in travel and in leisure time activities" (p271). This highlights the changes in work patterns, increases in free time, better access to leisure activities for the majority of the population, as well as the growth in the 'leisure industry'. Leisure has become a source and a site of inequality (Alcock, 1997).

Indeed, low income has a direct influence on the capacity of an individual and family to participate in leisure activities (since few are free) and can contribute to the general exclusion of these groups from society. The GHS 1996 (NSO, 1998) shows a correlation between occupation and participation in sport, declining according to status and with a difference of 40% between the top and bottom 10% (see Table 1). Although it must be noted that socio-economic groupings do not accurately reflect income distributions in all cases.

Table 1 Participation in Sport by Socio-Economic Group (GHS, 1998)

%	Participating in at least one sport in last 4 weeks			
	1987	1990	1993	1996
Professional	65	65	64	63
Manager	52	53	53	52
Junior non-manual	45	49	49	47
Skilled manual	48	49	46	45
Semi-skilled	34	38	36	37
Unskilled	26	28	31	23
Total	45	48	47	46
Difference between professional and un-skilled	40	37	33	40

This paper will consider the role of local government in the provision of sporting and leisure opportunities for those poor groups in communities which face exclusion from society as a whole. The introductory section has differentiated poverty and social exclusion, and related both to leisure. This is now followed by an account of UK leisure policy development in relation to the economically disadvantaged. This describes the context for subsequent sections which focus on our research into a specific form of provision by UK local authorities, known as 'Leisure Cards' (LCs).

2 The emergence of Leisure Cards in the UK

Our research focuses on the most prevalent form of leisure and sport provision for the economically disadvantaged in the UK, namely Leisure Cards. We adopt a definition of "a membership scheme offering discounts for public and sometimes private, sport and sometimes leisure services". Before undertaking detailed case studies, we

conducted a national survey of local authorities involving questionnaires being posted to all 411 in the UK. From this we obtained a 52% response rate. With regard to the types of card, 55% were concession only (targeting low income groups only); 44% were multi-tier (targeting low income groups as only one tier of concessions which may also include all residents); and only 5% were residents'/loyalty cards (available to the whole population). We may not have picked up all of the latter, and more are being launched. In order to understand the nature of these schemes it is necessary to briefly describe the policy context in which they were introduced.

The expansion of facility provision in the 1970s did not lead to an equivalent increase in the breadth of representation of users. The typical leisure centre user remained male, white, middle-class, with access to private transport (Collins, 1979 in Henry, 1993). Across the board concessions, designed to keep prices low and remove price as a factor in non-participation, merely resulted in higher socio-economic groups taking advantage of cheap leisure, for which they could afford to pay more (Audit Commission, 1989) - a form of the 'free rider' problem familiar to economists. Sport for All was not being realised and some authorities sought new means of extending participation. Attempts to target low income groups involved discounted prices set individually by leisure centres, requiring groups such as the unemployed to show their UB40 forms every time they used facilities, which resulted in stigmatisation.

In what has been described as a two-tier welfare state (Henry, 1993; Stoker, 1989), the first tier comprises the secure, pensioned, well paid 'core' workers who can afford to buy leisure outside the 'welfare market' but use it nevertheless when entitled to do so. Ravenscroft referred to these people as 'leisure gainers'. The second tier comprises 'peripheral' workers with low, insecure incomes, unable to participate in this welfare consumerism, reliant on the 'no frills' provision or the welfare safety net; these are the 'leisure losers' who become excluded (Ravenscroft, 1993). Stoker (1989) identified this process as blurring the boundary between public services provided on the basis of need, and private services allocated on the basis of ability to pay. But, as Viebla (1986, p12) said "local government is not simply about providing 'services' to 'customers'...it is concerned with a broad notion of citizenship, which is a political rather than a managerial or market concept".

The first wave of Leisure Card schemes was introduced in the early-mid 1980s during a period of tension and conflict between central and local government and restricted leisure spending. In earlier research (Collins and Kennett, 1998) we identified the reasons for introducing them as: simplifying the complex pricing (administrative and managerial); keeping prices low to enable deprived people to participate (social); encouraging the use of empty space, especially of peak (economic). The second wave of Cards came during the increase in poverty described above and a significant decline in local governments' welfare services.

Leisure cards have all the features of a private membership scheme. There are rules of eligibility, wastage and turnover exist and so there is a need to promote and recruit. Since operating under CCT the schemes involve agreements between client authorities and contractors to pay for any shortfall in income by increasing management fees or reducing profit shares, therefore, there is a value for money issue. Leisure Cards could be argued as being aimed at social targets whilst having been designed as a managerialist tool, yet there has been little research.

3. Patterns of Leisure Card provision and operation in Britain

Firstly, our research highlighted that more than 50% of local authorities in the UK operated card schemes which were larger (73% over 100,000 people) and more likely to be in London Boroughs, Metropolitan Districts (of large cities) or Unitary authorities. Leisure Cards were much more likely to be introduced under Labour-control (57% compared to 16% under the Conservatives, and less than 10% by Liberal Democrats or "hung" councils), and in local authorities that are likely to spend more on leisure (the 40% with LCs spent over £30 net per head, compared with only 28% of authorities without). Moreover, these authorities were likely to have more people depending on Income Support payments from the state (modal values 10-14.9% compared to 5-9.9% for authorities without Cards), and to have more people defined as poor (according to an index derived by Gordon and Forrest, 1993) with more than 20% in poverty compared to 14% in authorities without Cards.

Reasons for the establishment of a Leisure Card

The reasons identified by local authorities for introducing a LC were divided between social, economic and managerial objectives. 80% of respondents gave primary social and political reasons for providing a Card, compared to only 7% with economic reasons, and 8% with managerial/administrative reasons (7%; 6%). There is further evidence of more widespread managerialist issues from the 33% of LC operators that indicated that discount use by card holders was restricted to off-peak times.

Target Groups

The groups targeted by LCs in the UK (Figure 1) are defined predominantly according to social security benefit categories, because that is linked to easy identification when residents present their applications for membership. Leisure Cards also target a broader range of groups than traditional discount systems (see Figure 1). Although 89% of schemes targeted Income Support and 73% Family Credit claimants, 79% targeted the unemployed, 64% full time students and 59% all pensioners (i.e. including those not on state benefits). These last three categories of member are not means-tested benefit claimants and include people who are not necessarily living on a low income. A significant number of authorities have reviewed their rules and 'tightened up' by excluding, for example, old age pensioners who are not on benefit, or by defining which students they would permit.

Scope of discount activities

As expected, municipal sport and recreation facilities were the focus of nearly all Leisure Cards surveyed (97%). It was clear from responses that by far the most popular activity is swimming, despite this a survey on swimming attendance by Collins and Taylor (1998) which suggested that discount use of pools had declined in the last three years compared to the previous five years. Only 40% of schemes included municipal arts facilities, involving arts centres, discounts on theatre tickets and town hall auditorium activities, which implies a conscious or unconscious policy decision by many not to open up access despite the widespread slogan 'Arts for All'.

Commercial sector involvement was still not widespread (28%) despite the fact that several schemes such as Leicester have demonstrated that the inclusion of a broad range of commercial operators from florists and taxis, to 10 pin bowling and cinemas

provide a more attractive image and encourages membership and usage from women, older people and those not interested in sport. As the Leicester Leisure Card officer said, the range should be "from veg to Verdi". Indeed, the cinema is the most popular activity in the Leicester Leisure Card scheme.

The majority of cards were free (32%), or cost between £1 and £2 (18%) or £2 and £3 (19%) a year for adults eligible for price concessions. The equivalent non-concessionary adult price for a multi-tiered Resident card was over £10 a year. The initial pricing of the card is very important because price increases, however small, can dramatically affect renewal rates. One authority in the North West of England increased its card price from £1 to £2 and suffered a 50% drop in membership. Elasticity of demand is very high, as low income groups do not have significant amounts of disposable income, and so discounted prices have to be sustainable in the long-term.

Discount levels varied widely. 29 schemes offered across-the-board discounts for cardholders at an average rate of 50% for sport and recreation activities. Four exceptional authorities offered free use to all cardholders. 39 schemes varied the level of discount according to activity, and further variation arose from restricting card use to off-peak periods. Commercial sector involvement by shops, cinemas, restaurants etc., produced an average benefit of a 10% discount for cardholders.

Marketing Card schemes

The marketing of Leisure Cards revolved around leisure centres, in the form of leaflets (88%) and posters (74%). Leaflets in other public places (69%) and newspaper advertisements (44%) were the next most common media of marketing, and all these have low 'strike rates' in terms of success in attracting customers. However, there was limited evidence of active outreach activities to encourage non-participants. Exceptional authorities included Leeds and Amber Valley which utilised road shows which appeared at events in their respective communities, and Leicester where the marketing staff travelled to all secondary schools at the start of each academic year, to job centres, women's, disabled and ethnic clubs to sign up new members. Cards need staff; we estimated from 22 schemes in large cities that it averaged one per 7000 members (Collins and Kennett, 1998).

Numerous schemes produced newsletters for members, usually quarterly. But few appointed marketing officers full or part time. One large Unitary council which had been a Leisure Card pioneer has replaced an experienced officer with an administrative assistant, and a senior officer commented "the scheme will have to be self-marketing now." Simply put, there is NO such thing as a self-marketing membership scheme; many members move, die, or change their status by getting a job, or a pay increase, and interests and other circumstances change. Without active marketing, even if discounts are not cut, membership will decline.

4 Renewing and monitoring Leisure Cards

78% of local authorities issued their cards for one year, 62% renewing them on a rolling basis. Although 75% of local authorities monitored their schemes via computerised systems, this still left 25% using manual records or simply not monitoring at all. Indeed, 17% of respondents did not monitor their scheme at all, and

a further 9% monitored every 2 years or less often. Intelligent tills were widespread, in over half of the authorities surveyed and smart cards, although in the minority of authorities are growing. Indeed, smart cards give an insight into the potential and the future of not just concessionary Card schemes, but of the future of wider leisure service information systems. The potential for management information reporting is extensive and enables the identification of minute usage detail. The remainder of the Card schemes provided little detail of monitoring data, with only 56% of authorities monitoring take-up by target groups, and even fewer of take-up at facilities (39%).

Monitoring is made more difficult because people claiming more than one type of benefit can be eligible under a number of categories, which blurs any measure of target effectiveness. Another considerable problem is human resources, with many authorities expressing frustration at not having the man-hours and/or the technical knowledge to retrieve information from databases. The review process is often isolated and potentially meaningless, as 66% of schemes claimed that they had no performance targets for measurement and comparative purposes.

Indeed, contributing to these problems is the fact that 15% of schemes were operated with an annual budget below £5,000 a year and a further 23% with no specific budget at all also contributing to inadequate staffing levels. Therefore, when asked if budgets were adequate to operate the schemes effectively, it is no surprise that 27% of authorities said that it was not, while it must be noted that 37% of respondents declined to answer this question. Indeed, the perceived costs of administration (31%) and subsidisation involved in introducing and operating a Leisure Card were the two most important reasons for authorities without Leisure Cards establishing one.

From this last section, it is obvious that precise data and comparisons are difficult and partial. The three most obvious performance indicators are how many people hold cards (take up), which groups hold cards (targeting by group and geographically) and usage (proportion of discount use of facilities). Analysis of these three factors requires micro-study, and case studies of individual schemes will form the second phase of this research.

Even here there are problems of defining the eligible population. Figure 2 shows this as percentage of total population. It can be seen that in all four groups of authorities, take-up was often in single figures and in terms of target deprived groups, these are about a quarter to a third of the population in all but the richest areas. Therefore, the most successful schemes reach 25-30% of those targeted, which, given the reluctance of many to take up more basic welfare entitlements, is a good result, one which would please any merchandiser. One non-responding district council claims a take up of 62% of its Residents card. We have seen a fairly defined targeting of Leisure cards from Figure 1, although the effectiveness of reaching particular groups can only be done from membership records.

However, take up does not equal usage; many may treat their card as an occasional convenience, like the millions of bikes stored but not used much; only 5,600 of Manchester's 120,000 residents cards are used regularly but in Swansea 42% of members used their card weekly. Cardholders, for example, were 68% of Coventry Sports Centre and 32% of another Leisure Centre's users.

5 Conclusions

Leisure Cards schemes are features of more than half of all local authorities in the UK; after the second wave of new schemes and re-launches which is set to continue, as a third of respondents without schemes stated the intention of establishing one in the next two years. This could mean an adoption rate of 80%. Surely they must be a good thing?

However, a fundamental trend within this wave has been a movement away from concessionary group only cards towards residents cards and multi-tiered schemes. This has come as a result of reduced leisure budgets and the increased need for financial accountability and financial return on investment. Social objectives appear to be pushed into the background as the economic, managerial and marketing potentials of Leisure Cards or loyalty cards are being realised. There is no reason why a balanced scheme, offering a wide range of municipal and commercial activities at sustainably affordable prices for both customers and operators, cannot achieve social, economic, managerial and marketing objectives simultaneously - a managerialist answer to a social problem!

There is no suggestion that leisure and sporting opportunities can in any way solve the problems of poverty and social exclusion single handedly. But, as Cars et al (1998) state "it is possible to design a mix of measures which both improve the physical environment and develop the provision of those educational, employment, health, cultural and **leisure activities** which underpin creating the kinds of social, economic, political and cultural relationships necessary to combat social exclusion" (1998 p286). The justification for this is simple, social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon which requires multidimensional policy responses.

Yet, until these schemes are corporately owned and valued by operators, and adequate resources invested in them, their achievement of these objectives will continue to be a struggle, and many will continue to fail. These schemes must be managed with clear, realistic strategic and financial aims based on research into the needs of the target groups, actively marketed, monitored frequently and in detail, and constantly reviewed and reassessed. Only in such circumstances can they be expected to succeed in achieving their objectives and in justifying the investment made in them. Left to stagnate, Card schemes can become black holes, where resources and members disappear, and nobody can quite remember why the scheme was established in the first place.

Glyptis (1989) highlighted the persistence of a duality in the provision of leisure opportunities, paralleling provision for enjoyment with the belief that it can "contain urban problems, build a sense of community and...overcome class and other social inequalities". The large question, are social objectives and management targets being met? cannot really yet be answered.

References

- Alcock, P.** (1997, 2nd ed) *Understanding poverty* London: Routledge
- Allen, J et al.** (eds) (1998) *Social Exclusion in European Cities: Processes, Experiences and Responses*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Audit Commission** (1989) *Sport For Whom?*, London: HMSO.
- Berghman, J.** (1998) Social Exclusion in Europe: Policy Context and Analytical Framework, in Room, G et al. (ed) (1995) *Beyond the Threshold: the measurement and analysis of social exclusion*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cars, G et al.** (1998) Social Exclusion in European Cities, in Allen, J et al. (eds) (1998) *Social Exclusion in European Cities: Processes, Experiences and Responses*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- CEC** (1993) *Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion and to Promote Social Solidarity*, Brussels: DGV.
- Collins, M.F. and Kennett, C.** (1998), Leisure, Poverty and Social Inclusion: the Growing Role of Passports in Public Leisure Services in Britain, *Local Governance*, 24 (2)
- Collins, P. and Taylor, P.** (1997) Swimming participation: down and out or on the up pp146-51 in *Taking sport to heart*, proceedings of Institute of Sport and Recreation Management conference, Glasgow 14-16 Oct, 1997, Melton Mowbray: The Institute.
- Department of Culture, Media and Sport** (1998) *The DCMS comprehensive spending review: a new approach to investment in culture* consultation paper, London: The Department
- Glyptis, S.** (1989), *Leisure & Unemployment*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Gordon, D. and Forrest, R.** (1995), *People and Places 2: Social and Economic Distinctions in England*, Bristol: SAUS.
- Henry, I. H.** (1993), *The Politics of Leisure Policy*, Basingstoke: MacMillan.
- HMSO** (1995), *Households Below Average Income (HBAI): A Statistical Analysis* London: Government Statistical Service.
- National Statistics Office** (1998) *GHS 1996*, London: HMSO.
- Ravenscroft, N.** (1993), *Public Leisure Provision and the Good Citizen Leisure Studies*, 12: p. 33-44..
- Room, G et al.** (1993) *Anti-Poverty Research in Europe*, Bristol: SAUS.
- Room, G et al.** (1995) *Beyond the Threshold: the measurement and analysis of social exclusion*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Stoker, G.** (1989), Creating a Local Government for a Post-Fordist Society: the Thatcherite Project? in J. Stewart and G. Stoker, (eds) *The Future of Local Government*, London: MacMillan
- Townsend, P.** (1979), *Poverty in the UK: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*, London: Penguin.
- Viebla, C.** (1986), Marketing and local: a contradiction in terms?, *Local Government Studies*, 12 (6): p. 14-19.

Figure 1: Groups targeted: a comparison between Local Authorities with and without Leisure Cards.

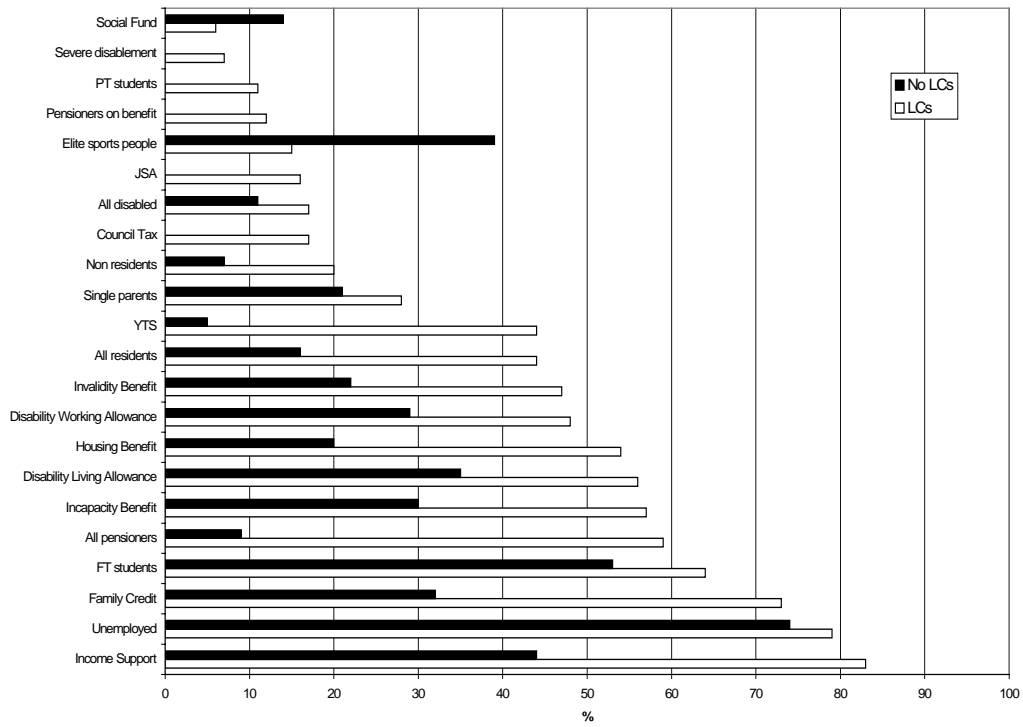


Figure 2: Take-up as a % of the population

