

The Leisure Connection Dossier

What are the Issues?

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Introduction

In September 2004 a West Devon Borough Councillor announced a new contract with Leisure Connection (LC) by claiming in the [local paper](#) "*They are a firm with an excellent reputation.*" A year on and West Devon has issues with LC that are similar to those of many other local authorities that had used the company. West Devon's issues appear [below](#). One reason for this dossier is to help councils to look harder and longer before awarding leisure contracts, including the need for effective monitoring and enforcement

As the company with the lion's share of municipal leisure contracts LC has more chances to make mistakes than smaller operators. Equally, the fact that it can point to some successes and satisfied customers does not take away from the issues identified here through referenced Audit Commission inspections, council documents and media reports.

For a number of reasons it is difficult to assess how typical the issues identified are. At some leisure centres few user complaints are logged even when conditions are appalling. A lack of complaints does not mean that the service is acceptable. Some customers give up reporting failings when they feel complaints make no difference. Then there is the question of whether complaints get processed properly. I know of instance when my complaint card disappeared and another when a new leisure manager found the customer comments box full when he took over.

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My search for user complaints has been limited in two ways. Firstly, the media will not know all complaints made, even quite serious ones. Even when known, the stories may not be reported. While search engines make some of the stories about LC traceable there is no way of knowing how many others have yet to come to light. Not all reports from some local papers appear on the web and where they do archive searches, if they have them, are often limited.

Secondly, local authority information on leisure complaints is variable. LC leisure centres collect complaints but how many of these are closely monitored by council officers? Council collation of leisure complaints does not everywhere and summaries are not always available to [Leisure Connection Watch](#) (LCW), even when the Freedom of Information Act is invoked. Councillors and managers may prefer to play down or even to conceal what has gone wrong to protect their reputations. To some extent officials can hide behind the commercial confidence that applies to contracts, an area of the Act that needs scrutiny if the law is to do what it was intended to do, improve accountability.

In short, the items reported below and elsewhere on LCW are not the full story. The truth lies somewhere between the dire picture suggested by the matters reported below and on LCW and the image fostered by LC's public relations activities. Readers will need to decide which part of the spectrum they think is more likely and ponder how LC might compare to other leisure operators.

The issues are certainly wider than LC. Between central and local government a situation has develop and persisted where many councils struggle to provide decent leisure facilities. The Audit Commission, with its focus on individual councils, has not identified the wider problems. The Sports Council's approach to quality, the QUEST annual inspections and reports, do not provide a reliable guide to decent standards of provision.

Some material used could fit under more than one heading but repetition of text has been limited. Many additional sources on LCW have not been used in this dossier.

The length of the document will not appeal to some but it reduces the need for checking back to original documents, a far more onerous task even with the embedded URLs. I welcome checking and will make improvements that do not add new material.

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My thanks to all who have helped LCW accumulate the information and assisted in the completion of this dossier. PB

Council Problems with Contracts

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Several local authorities have had difficult contracts with LC. The councils appear to have lacked commercial competence but one could also ask to what extent their weakness has been exploited? It is the user, council or national taxpayer who suffers when contracts go wrong. One would hope that decent companies use their experience to avoid deals that look likely to become fraught.

Hackney Contract

The Audit Commission inspected Hackney Council Sports and Leisure Services in 2002. It [reported](#), *"We judge the Service is poor"* for eight reasons, one of which was: *"Within the Hackney context, we are concerned by the level of control ceded by the Council to Leisure Connection, particularly over issues to do with pricing and opening hours."*

Hackney commissioned an internal audit report from [Price Waterhouse](#), delivered in February 2004. Listed under "Most Significant Risks" was *"Outsourcing of management of Leisure Centres may not be effectively controlled by Authority*

- *The quality of service to community may be affected*
- *Reputation of Council may be damaged*
- *There could be a potential loss of income."*

Comments alongside were, *"New 15-year contract with Leisure Connection Ltd operative early in 2002. There are concerns surrounding the standard of the product being provided to the public, with low community satisfaction reported.*

The main leisure centre (Clissold) within Hackney has been closed indefinitely due to health and safety concerns surrounding the building. This may result in additional costs to the Council and put at risk the unpaid element of the £1m Sport England lottery grant..."

Uttlesford Contract

From Audit Commission Report "[Uttlesford District Council Leisure & Cultural Services](#)" May 2003

"... The Council does not know what it wants to achieve from its investment in leisure, even though it has entered into a significant long term commitment through a Private Finance Initiative project (with Linteum, LC's vehicle for PFI) and continues to provide resources for a range of leisure and cultural activities..."

"The prospects for overall service improvement are uncertain because although some local people will benefit from better leisure facilities through the PFI project, there are many barriers, outlined in the report, which are likely to prevent the service as a whole improving..."

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"There is a lack of vision and ambition for the service and without a clear understanding what the Council wants to achieve from leisure and culture, it is not possible to say whether it is improving what matters most to local people..."

"Within the Council there is a poor understanding of how to improve services generally. Corporate capacity is limited and there is weak performance management. Prioritisation is poor and resources are not focused on priority areas."

Wycombe Contract

From Audit Commission Inspection Report "[Leisure Facilities Wycombe District Council](#)" August 2003

"The facilities covered by the best value review were Wycombe Sports Centre, Court Garden Leisure Complex, Holywell Mead Outdoor Pool, Risborough Springs Swim and Fitness Centre, Wycombe Heights Golf Centre, Wycombe Swan Theatre, and Wycombe Museum. The council works with a number of contractors and leaseholders to provide these services to its local community..."

"Customers still express good levels of satisfaction with the quality of the service provided by the contractors and operators of the facilities: A monthly telephone survey of users of Wycombe Sports Centre and Court Garden Leisure Complex shows constant satisfaction levels of approximately 80 per cent over the last three years..."

"Unfortunately, this is not the case at Risborough Springs Swim and Fitness Centre (operated by LC). The previous inspection reported good levels of satisfaction, but over the past two years this has fallen. Service delivery at the centre has not been good – there have been numerous staff changes, cleanliness has been poor, and there has been a lack of repairs and maintenance. This has led to customer dissatisfaction. Members of the customer panel told us, 'we moaned continuously about a lot of things but nothing was put right... We found that there has been significant progress at the leisure centres. In particular, the council has achieved many of the proposed joint actions with Wycombe Leisure Limited. However, as the council is aware, much less progress has been made with Leisure Connection plc."

Brent Contract

From Minutes of Brent Council Sports Service High Level Monitoring Meeting 7.5.04

"The performance of Leisure Connections in the management of the leisure centres is an ongoing issue. Value for money is not being achieved and previously weak client side management has allowed the contractors to provide a poor service. The contract itself is poorly specified and is not

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connected to a proper strategy for sports provision. Performance can be improved within the current contract but to achieve much improved services the existing contract which expires in 2006 will not be extended and will be re-tendered under a new spec'."

A year later the minutes of the "Annual Meeting - Leisure Connection and LB Brent" held on 24.6.05 record under "Overall Improvement" that *"LBB and LC recognise that cleaning at Vale Farm has improved but there needs to be greater consistency in standards and LC will continue to concentrate their efforts in this area."* "Areas Highlighted as Still Needing Improvement" offset the improvements. Improvements still needed are;

- *Repairs and maintenance - slow to implement necessary repairs and maintenance to equipment or fixtures and fittings e.g. broken gym equipment, light bulbs*
- *Showers and water temperature - this is an ongoing issue but one that leads to customer dissatisfaction*
- *External marketing...*
- *Junior sports programme...*
- *Complaints - the response times for complaints has improved, however the quality of some of the responses is poor*
- *Staffing levels - these are sometimes at a minimum*

Great Yarmouth Contract

From Audit Commission "[Cultural services whole service inspection Great Yarmouth Borough Council](#)" January 2005

"There are very low levels of satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities. A significant rise in the level of complaints about the Marina Centre (operated by LC) prompted a review by the Scrutiny Committee of the operation and management of this facility... performance information for contracted out leisure services is sparse and management of their performance is weak. ... "The council's management of partnership and contractual arrangements is inconsistent across the range of cultural services... the management of contracted out leisure services, for example the Marina Centre, has been less effective. The council has not fully engaged with the contractor in the past. Lack of rigour in the original contract and limited performance management has only recently been addressed with councillors and staff monitoring performance on a monthly basis..."

Harrow Contract

From an [Inspection Report of the Audit Commission into Cultural Services](#), July 2005

"Although the Council recently renewed the leisure management contract with its external partner (LC), the full potential for effective partnership working has not been realised. One example of this is the lack of agreement as to the appropriateness of the current repairs and maintenance arrangements. There is also a lack of clarity between the Council and the leisure contractor in

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respect of responsibilities around sports development, which has hindered service improvement in this area. There is confusion over roles and responsibilities as they have not been clearly defined or formalised. Ineffective communication between the Council and its leisure contractor has presented a barrier to improvement to date.”

Lambeth Contract

From the 2000 [London Borough of Lambeth, Medium Term Financial Strategy 2003/04 Schedule of Financial Considerations, Environment Department Executive Summary](#)

“The Environment Department assumed responsibility for a large number of long term contracts for services such as waste collection, leisure management services and parks maintenance...Many of these contracts were poorly negotiated and badly worded and as a consequence are expensive and burdensome to the Department...”

“In 1996 the leisure centres were externalised as part of a rationalisation and efficiency exercise. This resulted in the council entering into a 10-year contract with Leisure Connection plc producing immediate savings to the council...”

“Until recently there has been very limited monitoring of the existing leisure contract due to a lack of skill and resources. The current Head of Sports and Recreation has recently introduced a more rigorous monitoring approach. Through improving the monitoring of the existing leisure management contract the Council has been and is able to continue to lever default payments from the current contractor...”

“Since the leisure contract was externalised in 1996 and up until last year (2001) the council had not invested in client functions. As a result there were low levels of contract monitoring and a lack of follow up on areas of concern. Last year saw the formation of the Sport and Recreation Unit and a stronger client function... The unit is also developing an IT based system that will allow more regular monitoring of services. The level of defaults is a realistic assessment of what the unit can or could achieve through rectification and defaults...”

“The leisure contract requires the contractor to provide a level of service. Where this is failing the Council can remove this part of the service from the contract. Alternatively the Council can work with the contractor to develop a service area and to have savings returned in the form of the management fee arrangement for performance...”

“The existing leisure contract allows for the termination of the full contract or part of the contract due to service failings. However, over the last 12 months the Council has been negotiating with Leisure Connection around areas of performance and following legal advice it has been agreed to adopt a conciliatory approach and negotiated a way forward to identify service

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improvements and to attract additional investment into the facilities. Under the terms of the contract the operator retains 100% of income received."

The conciliatory approach opted for in 2000 met with limited success. The following was written by Lambeth Council's Head of Leisure in autumn 2005 and presented as part of a response to the [Environment & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee](#).

"Following the procurement of the Council's leisure services in 1996, Leisure Connection was awarded the contract for 10 years. The current contract expires in November 2006 and the Council has already begun the procurement process for the management of its leisure centres post November 2006. Experience has shown that the current contract has weaknesses that hamper totally effective enforcement."

Further evidence of tensions at Lambeth comes from the long delays in LC and Lambeth making payments of up to £100k to each other. Lambeth [documents](#) show that for over a year LC was listed as one of the top ten debtors to Environmental Services.

Lewisham Contract

Lewisham Council commissioned a "Review of Downham Lifestyles PFI Project Procurement Process", such was the concern if not anger over delays. An independent consultant with expertise in PFI delivered the 34-page report in January 2006. She reported that the project took *"just over four years in procurement from the approval of the Outline Business case"* but that this is not unusual in PFI deals, particularly in a complex and innovative one. She noted a Dutch bank had withdrawn from the scheme and replacement finance had to be found. While the council was not seen to be without fault there are some telling paragraphs concerning the Linteum / Leisure Connection Consortium.

The consortium was *"...negotiating two contracts concurrently, and from the summer of 2004 onwards they prioritised work on the Brent deal up until it closed during the following March. This was discussed extensively between LBL (Lewisham) and Linteum at the time, and indeed it was understood that Linteum was open about their strategy. However, the timing and certainty of communication on this point is somewhat unclear between the parties... The consortium sought to reassure LBL staff and advisers that this approach would make the eventual closure of the LBL deal easier."*

"This was suggested on the basis that the Brent scheme as much simpler, involving only leisure provision and a single client, and that issues resolved in Brent would be applicable to the LBL project. In the event, this did not happen because the LBL project was different and the Brent approach was not considered by LBL and its advisers to be applicable. It might even be argued that attempts to apply Brent caused further delay in the final stages of the LBL negotiations. Once again there was lack of clarity about communication... Although it is difficult to be precise, and impossible to disaggregate the impact

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of individual factors on the overall process, it is likely that the project would have been delivered several months earlier, if there had been no change of bank and no Brent deal running concurrently."

The report's concluding paragraph makes clear that the history of the procurement is a threat to the completion of the project. *"It is vital that any negative feelings and past difficulties are now set aside in order that all parties may work effectively together on the construction phase... This joint working should include liaison with the press to ensure the best possible publicity for the launch of Downham Lifestyles. Although I remain concerned about ongoing project management as the build phase progresses, I do believe that there is a collective will to do so."*

Unhappy Endings

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These are reports of contracts that ended with bad feelings. One might expect other councils not listed immediately below have been pleased to see the back of LC. For example, [Wycombe](#), mentioned above, who replaced LC at Risborough Springs in 2004.

Cheltenham Ending

From [Council Press Release](#) 27.11.02 *"...members unanimously approved the decision to bring the sport and leisure management contract under the control of the council. This will mean that the current contract with Leisure Connection will not be renewed beyond 31 March 2003... Cllr Duncan Smith, chair of overview and scrutiny, commented: "I am delighted that the cabinet have unanimously accepted my recommendation to bring the recreation centre back under council control... The record of the current contract has been examined and found wanting..."*

Salisbury Ending

From [Council Press Release](#) 4.3.04 *"The council's Cabinet has taken the decision not to renew the contract with Leisure Connection, the company that currently manages the centre, when it expires on March 31st... The £6.5 million state-of-the-art swimming centre was opened in the summer of 2002. Owned by Salisbury District Council, the running of the centre was contracted to Leisure Connection, the company that had been running the old leisure centre at the Hulse Road site. However, since its opening, the centre has been hit with several contractual and operational problems."*

Hackney Ending

Officially the contract was terminated by "mutual agreement" but [Building](#) magazine 29.7.05 claimed *"Leisure Connection are sacked three years into a 15-year operating contract."* As yet I am not aware of any retraction or even rebuttal of this claim made in a leading construction publication.

Swale Ending

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16.3.04 From a [council report](#) - *"The Head of Technical Services submitted a report on the present leisure contract at The Swallows, Sittingbourne that was requested in response to concerns expressed over the level of complaints received. Concerns had been raised over the decreasing level of cleanliness and several areas of minor maintenance, which had not been completed, despite several requests from Council Officers. The Head of Technical Services explained that the current leisure contract would expire in September 2004 and new contractors were being sought..."*

Health & Safety

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The public deserve high and consistent standards of safety when they swim, use gyms and other facilities. Safety management requires constant and consistent leadership, focus, well-trained staff and is proactive rather than waiting for users or council officers to report issues.

Mole Valley H & S

Which? Magazine in June 2002 identified Dorking Leisure Centre as having the only swimming pool out of 40 surveyed rated as a *"potentially serious health risk"*.

On 18.11.04 the Dorking Advertiser ran under "Staff fear leisure supervision unsafe / Cost Cuts at sport centre hit morale". It reported Dorking's Sports Centre staff were angry about a number of issues. Staff *"... have raised concerns with the district council that gym supervision and lifeguards are being cut to a minimum and that the use of casual labour is leading to poor cleanliness.... Leisure Connection will soon introduce a measure where just one lifeguard will monitor both pools and on some occasions the gym is unmanned. Staff there know this is not really safe."* Mr Cawdell (for the Council) said that while one lifeguard was acceptable under the agreement, the gym should not be left unmanned. *'I have told Leisure Connection the gym should be staffed at all times,' he added..."*

Babergh H & S

On 1.9.03 Babergh District Council issued a press release. *"Babergh District Council has today instructed Leisure Connection Ltd. to temporarily shut Hadleigh's swimming pool pending further investigations into higher than expected chlorine levels in the water. Leisure Connection Ltd. manage Hadleigh Pool on behalf of the Council. Babergh's Environmental Health team was called at 1.41pm today by a member of the public who was experiencing eye irritation after having swum in the pool earlier in the day. Two Babergh officers immediately went to the pool and on discovering higher than acceptable levels of chlorine in the water immediately requested the closure of the pool as a prudent measure pending further investigations..."*

In an email a Babergh Officer noted that, *"The failure of the dosing plant was the catalyst for the events in relation to the problems with the chemical dosing plant. The dosing plant failed and did not involve any human element and*

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maintenance checks were adequate. Human element can be blamed for details which followed the breakdown of the dosing equipment and our concerns were conveyed to Leisure Connection in respect of lack of staff training, knowledge and initiative." She also said that the EH readings of chemical levels differed from those taken by LC staff at the same time.

Kerrier H & S

From [This is the West Country](#) 27.5.04 *"Dangerously high temperatures caused by a failed heating system at Helston Sports Centre's swimming pool have led council officials to temporarily close the facility on the grounds of public safety. A team of officers from Kerrier District Council ordered the closure of the pool on Tuesday following an emergency inspection that revealed air temperatures at poolside were reaching over 40 degrees.*

"The inspection, sparked by complaints from users, revealed the heating system servicing the facility was broken, creating "abnormal" humidity levels and temperatures around the pool. Council officials said they had no choice but to immediately close the facility in the interests of health and safety until the problem was solved."

Hackney H & S

Private Eye No 1122, December 2004, reported, *"...Meanwhile Mr Ibrahim Khan of Hackney, East London, is nursing his wounds after the top bench on which he was sitting in the sauna at the borough's Britannia Leisure centre collapsed beneath him, causing bad bruising to his hand and arm and a painful blood clot in a finger. It was the third such collapse at the Leisure Connection-operated centre in as many months."*

Tunbridge Wells H & S

A Council "Rectification Notice" for Weald Sports Centre dated 8.1.05 noted *"Only one lifeguard on duty during unprogrammed swimming session. Sole lifeguard entered poolside store to obtain poles for lunchtime lane swimming session thus leaving the pool unsupervised."* This is a clear and worrying breach of Health and Safety Executive Guidance on lifeguarding in public pools.

Milton Keynes H & S

Following a visit to Bletchley Leisure Centre on 9.5.05 a Senior EHO wrote to LC regarding Health & Safety. Items included:

- *"..numerous areas of missing or damaged tiles to the pool, pool surround and changing rooms... This includes those tiles on the bottom of the pool that are causing cuts to bathers' feet..."*
- *...build up of algae and scale in the swimming pool, particularly on the grouting between the tiles; such a build-up could allow bacteria such as pseudomonas to grow."*

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- *The support to the slide is rusty in part and is allowing rust particles to enter the pool water...*
- *Rust entering the pool. Iron is a prerequisite for Legionella bacteria to grow together with a matrix such as that provided by the scale and algae and water at a temperature between 20°C and 50°C".*
- *The scum channel to the pool is in a poor condition in that the plastic walls are damaged in part with the surface coating worn, and there are areas of unprotected concrete that show signs of contamination with rust and algae. This will allow a further build-up of scale and algae and may allow water to leak from the pool. The scum channel should be repaired to leave it in good repair.*

South Norfolk H & S

From the report to South Norfolk Council by a "Mystery Customer" in the Summer of 2005 to Wymondham Leisure Centre.

"A number of Health and Safety issues were noted during the visit and all related to pool supervision. During the aqua fit class 2 lifeguards were on duty for the first 20 minutes of the class and were positioned at the shallow end of the main pool chatting to each other ... Throughout the session lifeguards continually came onto poolside to chat to the duty lifeguard and at one point there were three on poolside deep in conversation... During this session a lady appeared to suffer with severe cramp. Another pool user approached her, however, no staff member offered assistance... I felt there were sufficient lifeguards on duty however, very little actual pool supervision taking place, which portrayed a lack of customer care and health and safety awareness."

Brent H & S

From a letter to LC from Brent Council H&S dated 11.1.0.05; *"Further to my letter dated 16th June 2005 and during my visit to the centre on 4th October 2005, it has been noted that the centres' procedures are designed around the Health and Safety Executive guidance publication; HSG179, Managing Health and Safety in Swimming Pools, which for the purposes of maintaining user safety are adequate at this time.*

"However, it would appear that these procedures have not been fully adhered to and in order to satisfy the duty of ensuring the health, safety and welfare of employees and other users of the premises; an improvement notice has been served upon Leisure Connections Ltd. I shall be revisiting the premises after 3rd November 2005 to inspect the remedial action regarding lifeguard supervision and associated documentation."

Poor Cleaning & Other Hygiene Issues

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The number of reports over time referring to no or persistent poor cleaning, even after repeated complaints, suggest that LC has set out cut costs through skimping on cleaning budgets. A strong indicator of this is what happened in [East Cambridgeshire](#) and [West Devon](#) (see below) almost a year after the

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most recent LC Chief Executive was appointed. It appears that there was no new broom for cleaning following Graham Farrant's arrival.

Daventry Cleaning & Hygiene

The [Daventry Express](#) 5.1.01 reported, *"A clean-up policy has been ordered at Daventry Leisure Centre swimming pool following complaints from users. Maris Ross has been going to the centre in Lodge Road for more than a year for a Sunday evening swim. Mrs Ross... said: I've raised the issue with various duty managers because I have never seen such disgusting conditions in a swimming pool changing area. The open drains are usually blocked with static dirty water, the floors are filthy and the pool has a tidemark of grime. It's the same every time I go there. She contacted the Daventry Express after reading letters published from other people concerned about the centre's standards of cleanliness..."*

Harrow Cleaning & Hygiene

The [Audit Commission Sport & Leisure Inspection Report](#) in 2002 noted: *"Concern over the standard of cleanliness at Harrow Leisure Centre has been raised by the public and the Council monitoring team."*

Swale Cleaning & Hygiene

The Audit Commission report on [Swale Borough Council Leisure and Sports Centres June 2002](#) under Cleanliness noted; *"The 'Quest' assessment at Swallows raised issues around whether the cleaning standards were proactive or reactive. The contractor (then LC) admitted that there are problems at the sites they manage. On our reality checks we found acceptable standards of cleanliness at those sites managed by Leisure Connection, and above average standards at Faversham."* Faversham is another Swale facility managed by a Trust.

Cheltenham Cleaning & Hygiene

The Citizen 1.4.03 reported; *"Leisure Connection, which won the council contract under its previous name Circa Leisure in August 1996, was given its marching orders after a council report said the firm had failed to meet performance targets. It followed a council-commissioned survey, which found 40 per cent of users thought the centre's cleanliness was poor or very poor. Many people complained there were too few staff. In September 2001, officers cited 32 instances since 1996 where Leisure Connection had failed to meet its contractual obligations."*

Great Yarmouth Cleaning & Hygiene

On 5.3.03 [Lowestoft Live](#), ran *"Leisure Connection, the company with the long-term contract to manage the council-owned Marina Centre sports and leisure complex on Great Yarmouth seafront, has been criticised in a report. The report highlighted various disputes concerning the contract and claimed*

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that the Council had to repeatedly get on to the Centre management to get anything done..." A specific incident was mentioned when the kitchens were found to be so dirty that a firm of caterers using them to supply food to a conference at the Centre felt it necessary to call Environmental Health officers.

The [Evening News](#) on 13.12.04 reviewing the future of the Marina Centre reported, Councillor Colleen Walker saying, "My grandchildren won't use it because of the recent publicity about human excrement being found and the state of the changing rooms..." The News also noted, *"Between April 2002 and May 2003, people complained about the cleanliness of floors and toilets, toilets being out of order for long periods, rudeness of staff, low water temperature, temperature of showers, lack of information on opening times, inadequate lockers and rooms being double-booked. The (council) review found that although improvements had been made, the cleanliness and condition of some areas was still poor... It also found that little maintenance had been carried out until recent months, and concluded that, in accordance with the terms of the contract, Leisure Connection should have undertaken most of the refurbishment in the last few years."*

Mole Valley Cleaning & Hygiene

On 13.6.03 the [Dorking Advertiser](#) reported on the Which magazine finding about Dorking Swimming Centre and how LC had not disclosed to the Council the findings in advance of publication. It added, *"But the report is not the first time the pool has been criticised. Kate Ferris... complained to the district council about filthy facilities at Dorking Swimming Centre about a month ago, before the Which? findings were released. 'The changing area in particular just stinks so much. I think even the public toilets in South Street are cleaner, which says something. Whenever I go there all the mums are complaining about the state of it.' ..."*

"Carol Millett... said: 'The district council was aware of the findings of the report in February, but the cleanliness of the pool has deteriorated between then and now. We as parents and teachers have noticed this problem for a long time. Something needs to be done about it.' She said the Which? report has confirmed the suspicions of many about the standards of the pool and surrounding facilities."

"Becky Smith... said she has stopped her daughter going to the pool after concerns about the hygiene. She said although she has often seen officials testing the water at the pool, the changing rooms, toilets and footbath are often very dirty..."

"Another concerned parent Ellie Slitcliff said: 'Surely this is serious enough for the council to be able to break with Leisure Connection or penalise them.'"

"Head of Leisure John Cawdell said: 'Leisure Connection runs the pool in accordance with strict specifications given to it by the district council.' ... He confirmed some complaints had been received over standards about six to

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eight weeks ago. 'Leisure Connection advised us that it did have problems with cleaning contractors at the time and they have since increased the frequency and have done all they can,' he said...."

However, LC were still having problems at the centre with cleaning and other issues in November 2004 as reported [above](#).

St Albans Cleaning & Hygiene

While LC ran the Child Care Centre at Adventure World there was an OFSTED inspection of on 1.3.04, following an earlier, disappointing inspection.

The later [OFSTED Report](#) concluded that the Centre "...provides *unsatisfactory care*" for a number of reasons. One of these was, "*Hygiene throughout the building is poor and staff are failing to promote the health of the children and take positive steps to prevent the spread of infection.*" This in part related to a national standard referring to "children's bedding, used potties, nappy changing, dummies and children's cups".

Uttlesford Cleaning & Hygiene

On 6.8.04 the [Saffron Walden Reporter](#) ran a story about the Lord Butler Centre. "*Councillors will be looking for action to be taken to improve the standard of service at a leisure centre following complaints from customers... At their quarterly meeting next Thursday, September 2, Cllr Morson will be seeking a response from Leisure Connection area manager Phil Jenkins to complaints from dissatisfied customers who have highlighted concerns about the cost of using the centre and its cleanliness...*"

A month later on 10.9.04 [This is Essex](#) reported on two other centres. "*Councillors have ordered leisure centres in Dunmow and Stansted to shape up or pay up. Members of Uttlesford District Council's community and leisure committee have issued a warning to Leisure Connection, the company responsible for running the Great Dunmow Leisure Centre and the Mountfitchet Romeera Leisure Centre. Feedback from a council survey highlighted problems including poor customer awareness, and hygiene, lack of staff knowledge, expensive membership, a shortage of courses and the need for repairs.*"

South Norfolk Cleaning & Hygiene

On 14.10.05 a council officer inspected the building with an independent cleaning expert. The [reported findings](#) include:

- *There were 2 plastic playpens for children, which were very dirty, both inside and out. On closer inspection there were deposits under the pens including hair.*
- *Although it was 8.45 a.m. the bins were at least half full throughout this area, which will be a potential health and fire hazard.*

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- *When entering the sauna and lifting the mat, it was evident that there had only been superficial cleaning as there were large deposits of hair and general dirt.*
- *There was an hourly checklist in this area that had not been signed off.*
- *The male and female toilets in the pool area were both very dirty with large lime scale and dirt deposits in various areas. On the male side the areas around the urinals were particularly in need of attention with the floor being very discoloured. The female toilets again had heavily marked floor tiles particularly around the basins and there were cracked floor tiles. Behind one of the toilets there was a build up of mould.*
- *The white plastic covering the gullies surrounding the pool were very dirty and almost black in some areas, particularly around the steps to the pool.*
- *The gullies themselves on closer inspection when lifting the white plastic top were very dirty, once again particularly around the steps. When wiping this with my hand there were large deposits of dirt/body fat.*
- *The carpet area was dirty and in need of a deep clean.*
- *The carpets throughout the dry side of the building were very marked, particularly on the stairs and viewing balcony area.*
- *The squash courts were very dusty, particularly around the edges.*
- *During our visit we were approached by 4 members of the public who asked us what we were doing and then proceeded to tell us their views regarding the cleanliness of the facility without any prompting. The comments were that: It was generally dirty/grubby; School children not encouraged to shower before swimming; Cleaning was superficial; Very dusty; Fed up with complaining, as things don't get done.*

East Cambridgeshire Cleaning & Hygiene

There were complaints about cleanliness at the Paradise Pool in Ely in September 2003 – see [below](#) under Maintenance Issues. The Paradise Pool re-opened in the July 2005 after a £300k refurbishment funded by the Council.

On 18.10.05 the [Cambridge Evening News](#) reported the under the headline, "Boycott of pool prompts clean-up".

"Crisis talks have been held to discuss how to clean up a 'disgusting' swimming pool. Swimming lessons for children at Acremont House, the pre-prep of The King's School Ely, were cancelled after parents branded Ely's Paradise Pool 'filthy' and 'a disgrace'. Other schools which hold weekly swimming sessions at the pool also held emergency meetings to discuss the safety implications for their pupils. Swimmers have voiced their outrage at the state of the pool, which only reopened its doors in July after a six-month £300,000 refurbishment.

"And the News has been inundated with reports from unhappy customers who claim the floors of the changing rooms are covered in urine and on occasion faeces, the water is too cold and the pool has scum around the edge. An action plan has now been put in place after crisis talks were held between East Cambridgeshire District Council, which owns the pool in Newnham Street, and Leisure Connection, which manages the pool.

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

“Craig Forbes, Leisure Connection's regional director, said: "We would like to apologise if customers have not found previous visits enjoyable. "The cleaning hours have now been increased from 20 hours per week to 39 hours per week..."

How could a company with so much experience of leisure contracts think that that 20 hours cleaning a week would be adequate for a centre that is open for around 80 hours a week and has two pools, a meeting room and cafeteria?

West Devon Cleaning & Hygiene

A year after awarding the contract for two leisure centres to LC West Devon Borough Council had a [catalogue of failings](#) at them. These included:

- Dirty or other drain issues x6
- Overdue or no evidence of backwashing (pool water treatment to filter out dirt) x6
- Scum lines around cascades,
- Dirty kitchen, unacceptable state of fat fryers, oil on floor, messy café
- Poolside dirty, dirty troughs and grills in changing area, dirty floors
- Need for litter picking
- Smelly mats
- Unclean pool, objects in pool
- Councillor complaints about dirty changing rooms

Penwith Cleaning

From the Conclusion of “St. Ives Leisure Centre Performance Review Aug – Sept 2005”, by an officer of Penwith District Council.

“I think that overall the Centre is fair, but the standards of cleanliness should be much higher.

“Cleaning processes - I feel that the Leisure Connection Team need to work harder to counter these problems. If I can see dirt and dust, so can the customers, and so should the site staff. There is much needed improvement required and they require a Scheduled Cleaning Programme to be put in place, and this should be accompanied by training.”

Inadequate Maintenance

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There will often be issues at times between councils and contractors as to what maintenance is the responsibility of the operator. To some extent the problems stem from poor specification in the contract. Readers will need to consider what might be behind the issues reported below.

Great Yarmouth Maintenance

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

On 5.3.03 [Lowestoft Live](#) giving details of a report on LC and the Marina Centre said, *"The report highlighted various disputes concerning the contract and claimed that the Council had to repeatedly get on to the Centre management to get anything done. Items such as equipment maintenance were said to be not being addressed properly, and preventative maintenance was non-existent."*

On 22.1.04 [East Coast Live](#) reported: *"Following a catalogue of complaints Great Yarmouth Borough Council has given Leisure Connection, the management company operating the seafront Marina Centre, six weeks to complete a list of minor repairs and clean-ups. Items to be dealt with include tiles, sinks, toilets, bookings procedures, staff attitudes and locker security."*

St Albans Maintenance

From a report on [Leisure Facilities Condition Survey & Audit](#) presented to St Albans City & District Council on 16.3.04;

"Throughout January and February 2004 consultant tfh (sic) Architecture undertook a condition survey of the Council's leisure facilities which form part of the current leisure manager contract with Leisure Connection..."

Another notable result relates to Harpenden Swimming Pool - a facility built in 1999. The condition survey score being 54%. tfh Architecture note a rapid decline in condition that they attribute to:

**Poor design*

**Poor cleaning regimes*

**Poor maintenance of mechanical and electrical components."*

An Editorial in the [Herts Advertiser on 21.4.05](#) under the heading "Paying the price lax checks leave council in dispute over millions in leisure bills" stated;

"A lack of controls in the way leisure services in St Albans were handed over to a private contractor more than 10 years ago could now cost the district council dear. There is an argument between the council and its present contractors, Leisure Connection, over repairs and maintenance of sports and recreation facilities across the district.

"This wrangle follows a survey by architects appointed by the council which identified that £3 million of repair work on the district's leisure facilities will need to be done now or in the future. The council is at present negotiating with Leisure Connection on a building-by-building basis in a bid to establish liability for the work. Now strict new rules are to be put in place in a bid to avoid any future dispute...over maintenance of buildings.

"For it has been revealed that no survey of the condition of the Westminster Lodge complex, which includes the swimming pool, was undertaken before the original contractors, St Albans Leisure, took over in 1994. Community Services strategic director Steve Welch said: "We are determined we will not be in this position again and in preparing for a new contract which should be

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

in place later this year, we are introducing much stricter conditions..."

"Heritage and tourism portfolio holder, Cllr Melvyn Teare, said: 'I think one of the problems with the original contract was that the company which won it was basically the council's management team. And the problems have increased because of a number of takeovers over the years...'

East Cambridgeshire Maintenance

From [Cambridge News](#) 30.9.03; *"Standards at Ely's Paradise Swimming Pool have been rapped by some users. They claim that objects have been found floating in the water, which they say is also cold and unhygienic.*

"They were reacting after Keith Waters... criticised the facilities at the Newnham Street pool in our sister paper The Ely Weekly News. Mr Waters said the changing area was 'filthy and poorly maintained' and tiles above the waterline were covered in a layer of grime.

Mary Archibald... said: 'On one occasion my husband noted floating faeces, tissues and plasters in the pool, he not only complained to the management there, but also contacted the environmental health department only to be told that although it did not look very pleasant, there was no health hazard.' ...

However, Joan Diamond... said: 'I have swum two/three times weekly for at least five years. I have always found the staff helpful and caring.'

Hackney Maintenance

Following Mr Khan's accident in the sauna at Britannia Leisure Centre, mentioned [above](#), he submitted a detailed report with photos to LC and Hackney Council about the accident and other complaints. Mr Khan's report includes concerns about:

Steam room and sauna often out of order

- Health suite showers not available for over a week
- No drinking water in the health suite
- Inconsistent temperatures and lack of checking of chemical levels in spa bath
- Promises for improvements not kept.

Towards the end of his report Mr Khan wrote, *"The issues outlined in this report have all been addressed to members of staff and management, but our complaints are just swept under the carpet by management..."*

Spalding Maintenance

On 10.3.05 [Spalding Today](#) under the headline "Facilities 'in an appalling state'" reported on user views of Castle Sports Complex. *"...50 per cent of the (men's) lockers do not work or do not have keys. Most showers do not work and the ones that do are freezing cold. Tiles are falling off in the changing*

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

room, the seating is appalling and at times certain areas are roped off... Despite numerous complaints nothing seems to change."

A month later in a [second Spalding Today](#) piece Celia Fitton confirmed the women's side was no better. *"My main gripe is with the changing rooms. The lockers are abysmal and at one stage a couple of months ago only 20 out of a block of 50 were operational. Several have had their locks replaced but a number are still unusable. The sauna has had two benches missing for months... a young child in the shallow end while two of the lanes are closed for a swimming club... Mrs Fitton wrote a number of letters raising her concerns to the pool's former manager ... between March and June last year but she believes the problems have not been dealt with."*

West Lindsey Maintenance

From [West Lindsey District Council, Minutes of the Meeting 24.05.04](#)

Question by Councillor Bardsley; *"Last June I was given a copy of a petition submitted to West Lindsey District Council by a group of lady swimmers. This complained about the state of the female changing rooms attached to the swimming pool at the West Lindsey Leisure Centre in Gainsborough. The area was described as dirty and mouldy and 'neglected'.*

"As a regular user myself I have deplored the deteriorating condition of this area. I requested a copy of the contract between West Lindsey District Council and Leisure Connections ... I then asked that there should be a more general investigation into compliance with other terms of the contract focussing particularly on cleaning and maintenance schedules for the amenity. Areas of concern specifically mentioned were the swimming pool area, the squash courts and sports hall. A cursory inspection would suggest the resealing of floors in these latter areas is not being done as per the contract... These issues were raised at an inspection of the premises on 15 October last year. To date I have not received the promised full report of the response to my enquiries. I am aware that for much of this time the site manager has been absent from Gainsborough. However I do not consider this to be an adequate reason for the lack of response..."

Answer by Councillor Cotton: *"The contract to manage West Lindsey Leisure Centre was awarded to Connection Plc for the period from January 1997 to December 2006. Both performance and the requirement for enforcement action in line with the contract have fluctuated during this time. Monitoring arrangements between the District Council and Leisure Connection Plc have recently been strengthened and the need for enforcement action which includes the issuing of default notices will be considered if necessary as part of this process. Recent problems with the centre have been compounded by internal changes within Leisure Connection's management structure..."*

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

Milton Keynes Maintenance

Following a visit to Bletchley Leisure Centre on 9.5.05 a Senior EHO wrote to LC regarding Health & Safety. Maintenance items noted included:

- *There are areas of disrepair to the walls of the changing cubicles and health club showers that must be maintained and the areas left in good repair.*
- *There is no routine inspection of the cables to the weight training equipment to ensure that they are in a good state of repair. These cables must be routinely inspected and replaced in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.*
- *There were 3 pieces of equipment that had been found to be electrically faulty; I understand that there is no routine maintenance, which includes inspection, of the equipment to ensure that it is electrically safe. All equipment should be maintained by a competent person to ensure that it is safe.*

Staffing Issues

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Brent Staffing

From July 2002 report of Audit Commission following London Borough of Brent Sport & Leisure Inspection; *"Low levels of pay and high turnover of staff were seen as a major problem particularly by the contractor's staff. Also, while they appreciated the high level of customer care training received, they felt that more training could be made available on sport and fitness skills."*

Didcot Staffing

Leisure Connection operated the Didcot leisure facilities until October 2005.

[South Oxfordshire District Council's Best Value Review of Leisure 2002/03](#) noted *"The contracts and agreement do not contain any performance standards, and discussions are taking place with Leisure Connection concerning operational and financial objectives, and performance targets for the Centres..."*

"Leisure Connection advise that there was a total of 484 comments and 325 complaints received at the Didcot Wave and Didcot Leisure Centre during October 2000 and March 2002. An accurate breakdown of these figures is available for the period October 2001 - March 2002. The Didcot Leisure Centre received 23 comments and 14 complaints during this six-month period, and the Didcot Wave received 132 comments and 141 complaints."

The review noted that main issues raised by customers during this period included Staffing and went on to say, *"Leisure Connection has been aware that staffing issues have caused concern, although this has been improved in recent months..."*

Uttlesford Staffing

From the Dunmow Observer 13.5.04 under the headline, "Apathetic sports staff end dream." *"A Dunmow councillor has hit out at apathetic sports centre staff for failing to support his Uttlesford Superstars event... Letters and phone calls were made asking for a decision to be made as a cut-off date would be April 23/24 if this were to proceed. I very much regret that to date, nearly five weeks later, there has still not been the courtesy of a response, which I find unforgivable," he said this week... 'The leisure centre, which originally approved the plans, has done nothing at all to help progress this idea forward. It's total apathy," he said.*

"A spokeswoman for centre operator Leisure Connection said staff had been 'extremely accommodating both with their time and resources' in assisting Mr Silver with the event's organisation. They claimed he had been unable to secure insurance cover and had failed to formally confirm his booking. 'The centre staff are adamant that they have always responded to Mr Silver's communication since initial contact in December 2000,' she said.

The [Minutes of the Uttlesford Area Access Group General Meeting 6.9.04](#) show that others were peeved by the responsiveness of LC. Members of the Access Group were "disappointed" with LC following a report submitted after a visit to the Lord Butler Centre. One is recorded as saying he "... felt that it was a waste of time to carry out any further visits to the other centres if Leisure Connection were not prepared to take into account our comments... that the operator was taking a soft option when free advice had been made available, delivered by those with an experience of disability and that it was a great shame after alerting them to areas of concern they didn't appear to be taking on board the issues and working to improve things."

At the [February 2005 meeting of the Access Group](#) the disappointment continued to be expressed. *"Inclusive Fitness Initiative... It was obvious that the Public Finance Initiative funding arrangement was a problem. There was a long contractual lead in time with the 30-year lease operated by the Council. The Group felt extremely frustrated by the inaction of those concerned, i.e. the contract manager and the operators. Interest had been shown after the initial presentation but this had dissipated...*

"Peter informed the Group that he had been contacted by the Audit Commission who were reviewing the services of Uttlesford District Council. During the conversation, Peter had expressed his disappointment in Leisure Connection and ultimately the Council, in not bringing the facilities linked with IFI into the community. Funding was available along with demographic research relating to the number of disabled people within the community and where they are based. It seemed disappointing when other authorities would be taking advantage of such a facility. Money could be here now as the presentation had been made in November 2003."

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

From [Walden Local 23.9.04](#); *“Following recent issues raised by customers at the Lord Butler Leisure Centre, both Leisure Connection and Uttlesford District Council are working together to resolve concerns about staffing of the gym, cleanliness, cancelled classes, and staff training.*

“Discussions have taken place with Leisure Connection's subcontracted cleaning organisation to ensure the required standards are achieved in accordance with the contract. Meetings will be ongoing with regular reviews taking place. Structured cleaning times will be publicly displayed to assure customers that regular checks are carried out. Areas for further refurbishment work are currently under investigation and decisions regarding funding will be known in December.

The management acknowledges that there have been problems with group training classes due to both holidays and sickness. Coupled with an ambitious programme and a lack of qualified local instructors, this had led to short term cancellations. In order to address this situation a new programme will be unveiled at the forthcoming members' day on the 3rd October and staff are receiving training to reduce the number of classes cancelled in the future...”

Maldon Staffing

From the Minutes Of Leisure Connection Liaison Committee 20.7.04; *“Mrs Cybyk confirmed that a Category A Default Notice had been issued to Leisure Connection for a failure to open for the minimum hours stated in the contract for the Blackwater Leisure Centre during the recent half-term holiday. Miss Munford advised this had been due to staff shortages and it was agreed that Mrs Cybyk meet with Miss Munford to discuss staffing levels and how this may be resolved for the future.*

“It was clarified that this was the first Default Notice served on the Company since the start of the leisure management contract and while it was appreciated that it was safer to keep the swimming pool closed if staff numbers were inadequate, it was the view of the Authorised Officer that the Company had failed to deliver the service required by the Council and the Centre's users. It was hoped that the underlying problem with staffing levels at peak times can be resolved by the Company.”

St Albans Staffing

From [Herts Advertiser](#) 3.3.05 - *“Disappointed families are looking outside the district for fun swimming facilities because of the regular closure of the Westminster Lodge Aquazooms. The flumes are understood to have been closed on Sundays on a number of occasions during the last few months when the pool would expect to be at its busiest.*

“The closure has been blamed on a shortage of staff to man the flumes safely... The problems with the Aquazooms have arisen at the same time as Bricket Wood pool is closed, leaving the district very short of swimming facilities. A district council spokesperson said that to ensure safe use of the Aquazooms it

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

had become necessary for Leisure Connection to close them on four occasions in the last three months.”

Ealing Staffing

From [Minutes Of Ealing Council Meeting](#) on 21.6.05; “Councillor Mrs Emmet asked the cabinet member for Leisure, Culture and Sport the following question: *“Would the portfolio holder for Leisure agree with me that it is unacceptable to have to close Acton Swimming Pool due to mismanagement resulting in the pool running out of chlorine and also staff shortages?”*

The cabinet member stated that it was unacceptable for the leisure contractor to close the facility at any time unless prior permission was granted by the contract supervisor. As a result of two recent unplanned closures, Leisure Connection have been issued default notices and also incurred financial penalties.”

Lambeth Staffing

The [Epsom Guardian on 29.9.05](#) under the headline “Swimming pool slammed over failing standards” reported: *“Streatham Leisure Centre swimming pool was forced to shut 19 times in six months because of problems including vomit and faeces being found in the pool. In a report highlighting the centre's failing standards, customer service and cleanliness of the changing rooms also came in for criticism. While complaints have risen, customers have blamed the management for a number of the faults...”*

“The remaining two closures were put down to staff turning up late and inadequate staff cover. The centre manager has been suspended, pending an investigation, and disciplinary action has been taken against one member of staff for causing the pool to open late.

“Lambeth Council have introduced a new radical' cleaning strategy and appointed more poolside staff, while Centre Managers, Leisure Connection, have appointed a short-term manager to improve services.”

North Kesteven Staffing

From [Local Community Overview And Scrutiny Panel – 2 .12.04](#), Annual Joint Scene Setting Review, Joint Report By Client Team And Leisure Connection

North Kesteven Sports Centre : Key Themes

1. Staffing Leisure Connection identified that the staff turnover at the centre had been high. The appointment of a new Contract manager Mr Nick Jones was seen as an opportunity create some stability for the site and the challenge was to consolidate the position and develop the potential of the site.

Pricing Issues

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Some people object to any price hike. The majority will accept increases in line with inflation or for a better service. Many LC users would argue they see no improvement for higher charges or even a decline in standards. One of the justifications for raising prices is what neighbouring boroughs charge but to what extent is the quality of other services taken into account? And in some cases LC manages one or more of the facilities in adjoining areas.

Worcester Pricing

From [This is Worcester 11.10.02](#); *“Pensioners and youngsters have been hit in the pocket by bosses at a city swimming pool, who have increased prices by up to 50 per cent. Until this week, the cost of a concessionary swim at Sansome Walk Swimming Pool was automatically £1.20 for all children, students and pensioners. This has now been scrapped.*

“The new rate will still be £1.20 for people on a low income, such as those claiming Job Seeker's Allowance. If not, the cost is £1.80 if the swimmer has bought a £5 annual advantage card, and without the card it is £2.40 - the same as a non-concessionary swim. For youngsters whose parents are on a low income the charge remains £1.20. With an advantage card it is £1.80, but without it, the price rockets to £2.40

“One source at the swimming pool has told me attendance has already dropped,’ said pensioner John Pedley, who swims three times a week... ‘The price of an adult swim has not increased at all, but pensioners and children use the pool the most and they are being targeted. This is an appalling increase.’

“The price rise caught Mr Pedley unaware as he said there were no warning notices at the pool... ‘They do offer one back-handed concession in that if you buy an annual pass the tickets are £1.80 per swim, but that is still a 50 per cent increase.’ ...

“Nigel Mansfield, sport and recreation manager at Worcester City Council, said the overhaul was in line with the Audit Commission guidelines. ‘Some people in higher education and over 60 are not on low incomes, but if you are, then you will get a reduction to £1.20. If not, then you still get 25 per cent off...”

Spalding Pricing

On [22.8.01 Spalding Today](#) reported under “Petition Opposes Leisure Centre's Fees Increase” that *“Angry leisure centre users have been left fuming over big price increases and what they see as cuts in services. Two months ago management control of the Deepings Leisure Centre was handed to private company leisure Connection, which now runs the facility on behalf of South Kesteven District Council... Lorraine Moxham (30), of Market*

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Deeping, was so outraged when she found out about the hike in swimming lesson charges that she has started a petition.

“Instead of paying around £2.50 per session, from September lessons will now cost £2.80 a time. And rather than paying the fees in two half-termly instalments as before, the centre now requires payment of a £42 lump sum per child up front for the 15-week course....”

“Another disgruntled customer is Sandra Clarke, a member of the East Park Badminton Club which hires the centre's courts. The club used to hire courts at the off-peak rate of £4.65 but this rate has now been scrapped to bring the centre into line with others and it now has to pay the full rate of £7.75. She said: ‘The club has been going for 21 years and we have been really loyal to the leisure centre. Three weeks ago when we went to book the prices had doubled without warning. They are putting prices up and we are not seeing any improvements. We have put in a complaint.’

“The leisure centre's business manager ... said Swim school prices had been increased to bring them more into line with those the company ran at its other centres. But he added they were still lower than those at its centres in Stamford, Grantham and Bourne and customers should also notice improvements in the service on offer.”

And from [Spalding Today 21.12.05](#) under “Sports centre planning big increase in charges” we learn that “...Leisure Connection, which is contracted by South Holland District Council to run the Castle Sports Complex, wants to increase its charges by between 4.29 per cent and 33.33 per cent. It also wants to increase the price of a swim for a leisure card holder up to £2.15 (previously £1.85) and for a non-card holder to £2.50 (previously £2.20)... The proposals were revealed to the district council cabinet at its meeting...”

“A council report was quoted, “...that all charges should rise by inflation (currently 2.1 per cent) unless the service manager has provided a sound business case for not doing so. Coun Nick Worth, leisure and tourism portfolio holder, said he was concerned by some of Leisure Connection's percentage increases, especially the 30 per cent increase on the crèche facility. Cabinet asked for some of the figures to be reviewed and for some commissions on their report to be filled in before they approved the fees and charges.”

Harrow Pricing

From Harrow Observer 21.10.04 under “Leisure card cuts discount for pensioner”. *“A disabled woman was appalled to discover that she must pay 50 per cent more for exercising in Harrow after the introduction of the new Harrow Leisure Card. Maureen Stapleton... was shocked to learn of the rise when she arrived at Harrow Leisure Centre... for her weekly aquafit session. She said: ‘I went on Thursday and the price had gone up from £2.30 to £3.45 per class. Nobody was notified about this increase and most of the people who go to aquafit are pensioners who don't have lots of money to spare.’*

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

“The council-owned centre is run by Leisure Connection and, before the introduction of the leisure card, pensioners were given a discount on all activities. When the card came into force, the new 20 per cent discount applied only to specific activities. The aquafit classes were not among these. Councillor Navin Shah, deputy leader of Harrow Council, said the council was unaware of the discrepancy, adding, ‘We are looking into this matter and are confident we can reach a suitable agreement.’

The cost of the aquafit sessions was not the only thing worrying Mrs Stapleton. She said: ‘The centre is advertising discounted leisure for all, but that’s not the case. They say I get a big discount, but I’m paying £1 more each time. We’re not getting our money’s worth. The water is freezing, there is no heating in the changing rooms and the amplifier for the music is extremely old....’

“Rebecca Douglas of Leisure Connection said a replacement amplifier would soon be installed and the other problems raised had already been addressed.”

From Harrow Observer 18.11. 04 under “Campaigners celebrate victory after making a splash over leisure centre’s higher charges”; *“Angry pensioners who campaigned against high prices caused by Harrow’s new Leisure Card are celebrating a minor victory. Following discussions between Harrow Council and Leisure Connections, visitors to Harrow Leisure Centre in Christchurch Avenue, Wealdstone, will be asked to pay less for certain services...*

“The price has now reduced to £2.75 for over 50s and no Leisure Card is needed. Rebecca Douglas, spokeswoman for Leisure Connection, encouraged customers to provide feedback. She said: ‘As a result of our flexible approach to the management of these leisure facilities, we were able to easily amend the pricing structure.’

Uttlesford Pricing

From Saffron Walden Reporter – 11.12.03 under “Users of the Lord Butler sports centre in Saffron Walden are furious at a number of sweeping changes introduced by its new owners”; *“Bosses at Leisure Connection, which operates the Lord Butler Fitness and Leisure Centre, in Peaslands Road, Saffron Walden, have come under fire for:*

- *Increasing charges and axing a number of concessions for families and senior citizens;*
- *Cutting a number of group exercise classes and activities;*
- *Restructuring the membership system, including the abolition of monthly packages.*

“Users have also been angered that changes have been introduced with little or no notification - and that charges are set to go up again in the new year. Julie Nortell-Briggs... said she used to pay £250 for a full Ambassador membership, but was now being asked to pay £429 for a Lifestyle one, which entitles her to use fewer facilities...”

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

“Collette Biggs..., said: ‘They have cut out all membership concessions, except a few minimal ones for swimming, something which I was told by Uttlesford District Council would be safeguarded in this new arrangement.’

Sheila Abrams... said: “I think they are short-changing people, especially members. People are paying far more for a greatly-reduced service. It seems a shame families and OAPs are not being supported by our local leisure centre...”

“The centre has undergone a £1million refurbishment since Leisure Connection took over in December last year. The company holds a Private Finance Initiative contract for leisure services across Uttlesford, and also operates facilities in Stansted and Dunmow. District council leisure manager Gaynor Bradley said: ‘The PFI agreement allows the district council to monitor the leisure centre’s performance and enforce a pay mechanism if it doesn’t provide the services it said it would. It doesn’t give us the right to tell them what prices they can or cannot charge. Leisure Connection is a commercial operation and can set its own charges...’

“Statement from Leisure Connection: We recognise the broad spectrum of customer needs we consistently strive to fulfil. An ongoing policy of activity revision is in place to ensure our in-house programming mirrors the ever-changing demands of the customers... Classes are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that, in the limited time available, we continue to deliver a service that satisfies the majority of customers. This does mean that, on occasion, less popular classes need to be reviewed and resources allocated to areas that will benefit a larger percentage of our customers...”

From [Minutes of Council Community And Leisure Committee 7.6.05](#)

“Councillor F E Silver said that he thought the Leisure Manager was doing a very good job and the Leisure Centres were much improved but that half-price tickets should be issued to needy people at slack times. Councillor M L Foley thought transport costs inhibited many young people from attending the Centres. Members also felt existing discounts were so mean as to be unattractive.”

User Contract Issues

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The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) was sufficiently concerned about leisure user contracts as to issue [Guidance on Unfair Terms in Health and Fitness Club Agreements](#) in March 2002.

Following this, the Fitness Industry Association (FIA) published its [Code of Practice](#) in June 2004, no doubt after detailed consultation with its members, which include LC. Section 4 of the FIA code includes *“Ensure that any written contracts for members are in accordance with The Office of Fair Trading’s... Guidance.”*

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

Despite the OFT's good work and that of the FIA LC still managed to get it badly wrong. In November 2004 [Issue 39 of Fairtrading](#), published by OFT reported that LC had given an undertaking to re-write user contracts. There is an [OFT Table](#) of the issues. The extracts below are taken from it.

Contract Term	What's is wrong with it
3(a)	Potentially unfairly allowed the supplier to increase the agreed price without prior notice.
4(a)	Permitted the supplier excessive discretion to claim more than reasonable costs where the consumer cancels and the supplier is able to find a replacement booking.
4(b)(i)	Allowed the supplier to refuse to carry out its obligations under the agreement, at its discretion and without liability.
4(b)(ii)	Allowed the supplier excessive discretion to terminate the contract, adjust the booking and impose financial penalties for improper use of facilities.
4(b)(iii)	Allowed the supplier to retain the full hire charge where it cancels the contract because of improper use of the facilities by the consumer in circumstances where the supplier is able to find a replacement consumer.
4(b)(iv)	Provided the supplier excessive discretion to re-arrange bookings cancelled due to poor weather, competitions or other special events.
5	Allowed the supplier to unfairly exclude its liability in negligence or where it failed to act with reasonable care and skill.
6(c)	Potentially unfairly allowed the supplier to exclude liability for loss or damage in circumstances where a booking is cancelled for reasons within the supplier's reasonable control.
7(a)	Potentially unfairly allowed the supplier to exclude liability where it failed to carry out the service with reasonable care and skill.
10	Unfairly allowed the supplier excessive discretion to refuse admission to, or expel consumers from, the venue.

Despite Fair Trading 's action LC has varied its contract with users of its Harpers Fitness facilities without notifying them in advance or offering any reimbursement for the reduced service.

Around May 2004 councils with LC / Harpers contracts were informed formally of Leisure Connection's plan to nationally restructure their staffing, including

Leisure Connection Dossier - What are the Issues?

Harpers gyms. One consequence of this restructuring was that "full supervision" ended and there would be times when either no member of staff would be present while customers were exercising. This was a significant, unilateral variation of contract introduced without notice.

Over a long period Leisure Connection had advertised that Harpers Fitness provide "full supervision". For example, "Harpers Fitness is the perfect environment for you to achieve your personal fitness goals, offering you all of the following: Full supervision from fully trained, friendly and helpful staff". This appeared on LC web pages for some years and therefore was an implied if not explicit part of the contract for people joining Harpers.

This matter was reported to FIA in June 2004 as a complaint against LC under the FIA Code of Practice and was acknowledged. Despite reference to several sections of the OFT Guidance that appeared to have been breached by LC, as of January 2006 the FIA have not responded to this complaint or provided any explanation for ignoring it.

Thus another body that one might hope would help sort through the issues that concern leisure centre users looks the other way. It appears the FIA is looking after the interests of a major member rather than those of fitness customers.

About the Author

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I am a resident of Brent. I started researching Leisure Connection after the company and Brent Council largely ignored four years of complaints about Vale Farm Leisure Centre, or Vile Firm as some users call it.

I retired from BT in 2000 after 15 years in quality and organisation development and now work as an OD consultant and in health in number of roles.

Leisure Connection Watch is a one-person operation apart from the calls and correspondence it prompts.

I have no links of any kind with other leisure contractors. I would hope that while other operators might prefer attention to be focused on Leisure Connection my efforts serve as a warning to anyone who might be tempted to put in unrealistic bids, compromise services in the pursuit of profit, or fail to invest in the leadership that quality services requires.

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