

# QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE: A CASE STUDY





## COUNCIL CELEBRATES QUEST SUCCESS

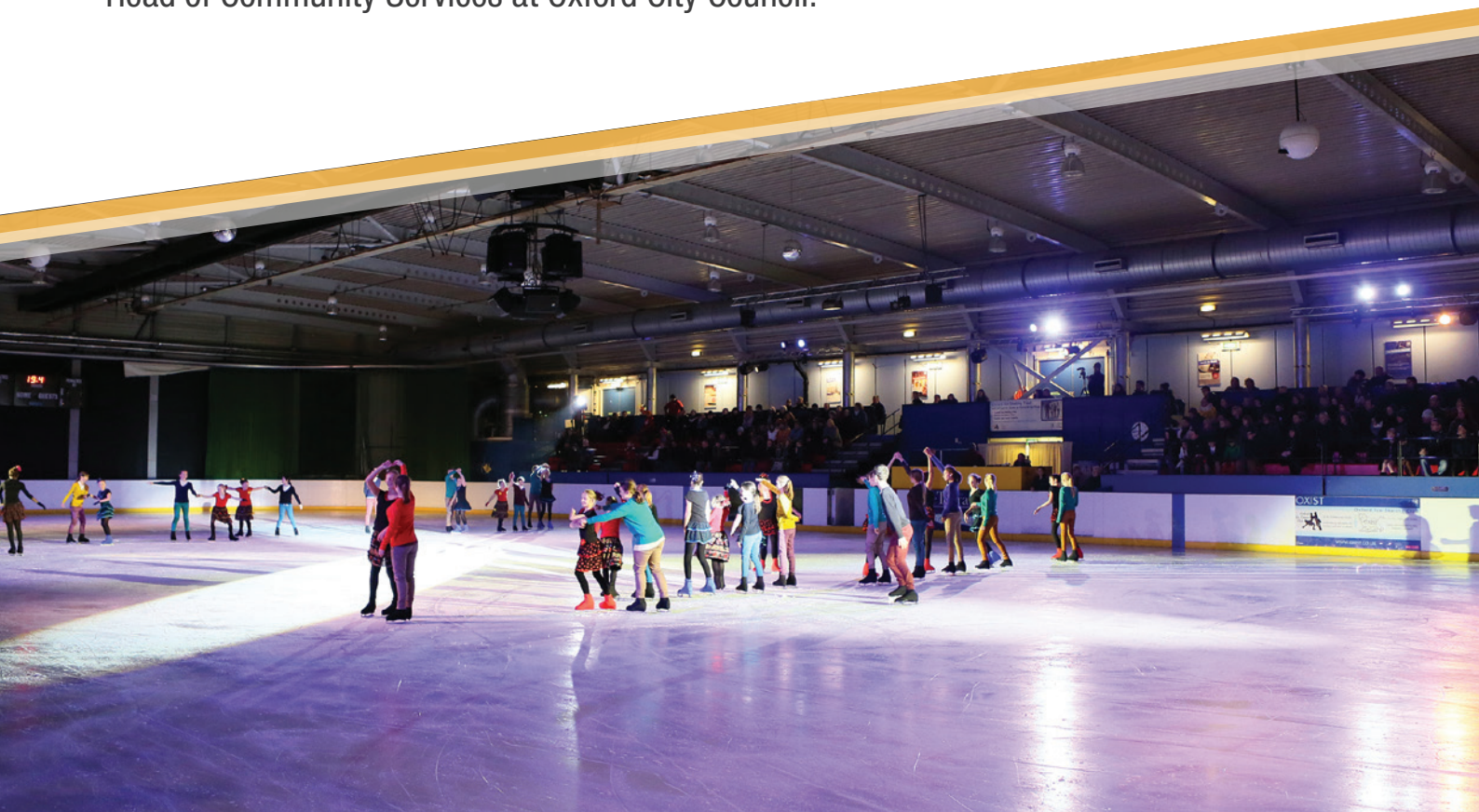
**As Oxford City Council achieves 'Excellent' in Quest for Active Communities, it credits the scheme with helping to turn its sport and leisure provision around.**

Oxford City Council has become the first local authority in the country to receive an 'Excellent' rating in Quest for Active Communities, the new assessment model from Quest, Sport England's quality scheme for sport and leisure - not bad for a council whose sport and leisure provision was rated poor by the Audit Commission just eight years ago.

Quest for Active Communities directly supports the priorities outlined in both Sport England's strategy 'Towards an Active Nation' and the government's 'Sporting Future' strategy, including physical health, mental wellbeing, individual development, social/community development and economic development.

The achievement of 'Excellent' in the new award - which replaces the old Quest Sport Development assessment - is the latest development in a long-standing relationship between Quest and Oxford City Council.

"We have chosen to work with Quest for the past eight years because of its focus on continuous improvement and its commitment to helping organisations like ours to demonstrate the impact we have on the communities we serve," says Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services at Oxford City Council.



“With less central funding available we are operating in an ever-more challenging environment and, in order to attract external investment, the need to make a strong case for sport and leisure is imperative. The rigorous quality assurance offered by Quest enables us to do that, as well as allowing us to benchmark ourselves effectively against others in the industry.

“Quest also has good recognition within the industry, and increasingly outside it, which gives both our communities and our partners confidence in our services.”





## ROAD TO SUCCESS

When Oxford City Council first signed up to Quest, its sport and leisure provision was failing. Hagan Lewisman, the council's Active Communities Manager, credits the scheme with helping them turn that around. "Before we got involved with Quest, our services were rated poor by the Audit Commission, and the service being delivered to our customers and residents fell way below acceptable standards," he says. "There was a real sense at that time that a positive step-change was required. Creating an ethos of continual improvement was integral to this, and Quest enabled us to embed that.

"It really helped us look outward, driving us to benchmark and seek best practice. We gained insight from talking to the assessors as well as to other high-performing sports and leisure teams, such as Westminster, Durham, East Riding, Birmingham and Kent."

In 2009, Barton Leisure Centre became the first Oxford City Council site to go through Quest Facility Management (now Quest for Facilities) assessment, and the following year the council's in-house sport development team achieved Quest Sport Development accreditation. Also in 2009, the council appointed Fusion Lifestyle as its leisure management operator, with an ethos of continuous improvement and a commitment to Quest included in its conditions of contract.

Today, in addition to the Active Communities award, all three of the council's leisure centres have Quest accreditation, one with an 'Excellent' rating, one with 'Very Good' and one with 'Good'. An ice rink and outdoor pool managed by the council are also Quest-accredited.





## COMMUNITY FOCUS

According to Lewisman, Quest's decision to replace the Sport Development assessment with a new Active Communities model dovetailed perfectly with changes the council was already implementing. This included internal restructuring to create an Active Communities services team, integrating the individual teams for Sport and Physical Activity, Leisure, Parks and Green Space Development, Youth Ambition and Community Centres.

The new team has also forged much closer partnerships with the council's housing, planning, environmental sustainability and community safety teams, as well as with external groups such as community associations, tenants and residents' associations, social clubs, housing associations and even pubs.

"The new Quest model very much reflects the direction we have been moving in: working in partnership to have more demonstrable impact within our communities. It focuses more on the impacts delivered in a better, more holistic way; and it has allowed us to showcase more of the work we already do while also highlighting new areas for us to grow into. Meanwhile, the process itself was as positive and productive as ever."





The introduction of two new modules and substantial changes to existing modules in the move from the Sport Development to the Active Communities model did mean an initial increase in work to review, reflect and fill out the necessary preparation forms, but “this really helped us to focus as a team and ensure we were fully prepared,” says Lewisman. “The assessment itself was also more challenging, but in a constructive way.”

The new modules - Increasing Participation and Reducing Inactivity, and Insight and Marketing - have allowed the council to demonstrate what it's already doing in these areas while also identifying where it can improve. “The main challenge highlighted was how to differentiate between where we have increased participation and where we have reduced inactivity, as these can be very different. We now have a better understanding of both the insight and targeted approach required.”

Modules where the council did particularly well included People and Skills Development; Partnerships and Collaboration; Engaging with Young People; and Engaging with Communities.





## TANGIBLE RESULTS

According to Lewisman, working with Quest over the past eight years has not only enabled the council to reflect local needs and link with national priorities more effectively; it has also helped to attract external funding of more than £1.3m. “It gives funders confidence that we are well-run, showing that we have a fantastic track record of delivery and can demonstrate great results.”

These results include an impressive 53% increase in participation at its leisure centres, from 896,000 in 2009/2010 to 1,370,000 in 2016/2017, including a 40% increase in visits by target groups: younger and older people; black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people; disabled people; and people from areas of deprivation. A February 2016 evaluation using Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology found that Fusion Lifestyle generated a gain of more than £18m from its work in Oxford during 2014 alone.

Also over the past eight years, the leisure centre operations have achieved cumulative cash savings of around £1.94m a year while also offering a greatly improved user experience: 92% of users are currently satisfied with the centres while 75% rate them as good or excellent.

The figures for sport development are equally positive, with year-on-year increases in regular adult participation peaking at over 31% in 2016. Meanwhile, participation among children and young people is up to an all-time high of 6,700 and evaluation through SROI methodology showed a gain of £13m through the council's Youth Ambition programme from April 2015 to March 2016.





## CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

Thanks to Quest's emphasis on continual improvement, the journey does not end here. "The same principles that have helped us to achieve high levels of impact for our communities to date will ensure we do not rest on our laurels, but continue to improve and adapt to a fast-changing environment," says Lewisman.

Martyn Allison, chair of the Quest board, is hopeful Oxford City Council's success will inspire other local authorities to commit to Quest: "These are challenging times for the sport and leisure sector and being recognised as excellent in anything is something to be proud of; Quest provides that recognition while also helping organisations identify where and how they can improve further.

"We have designed Quest for Active Communities to reflect the changing landscape, with a focus on getting the inactive active and not just getting the active more active. In times of austerity, when subsidies are being cut and income is king, it is easy for hard-to-reach groups to be squeezed out of sport and leisure facilities. The latest Active Lives survey shows that the poorest socio-economic groups are more than twice as likely to be inactive than the richest group, yet these are the people that need physical activity the most.

"Local authorities must work to close this gap. With Quest's help, Oxford City Council has shown it is possible to rise to this challenge, and now has an opportunity to share its good practice with others."





## SUPPORTERS



## QUEST QUALITY SCHEME

Quest is a tool for continuous improvements, designed primarily for the management of leisure facilities and leisure development.

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