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Neath Port Talbot Leisure Trust –  
Celtic Community Leisure

**Neath Port Talbot County Borough  
Council**

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## Introduction

- 1 As part of the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI), the Audit Commission in Wales (ACiW) carried out a joint risk assessment with each local authority in early 2003. As a result of this, it was agreed to evaluate the Trust arrangement that Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council entered into for the delivery of its leisure services.

## Background

- 2 The Council decided, in December 2002, that with effect from 1 April 2003, it would transfer its leisure centres and swimming pools to an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS). As such, Neath Port Talbot Leisure Limited was registered with the Financial Services Authority as an IPS and the business now operates under the trading name of Celtic Community Leisure (CCL).
- 3 The ACiW was fully involved in discussions with the Council on the establishment of the Trust. ACiW attended meetings, made comments and produced reports, including one in July 2002 which gave a full overview of the Council's progress towards its proposals at that date. These discussions and reports concluded that satisfactory arrangements had been made to protect the Council's and the Community's interests during the transfer.
- 4 It was agreed with the Council in April 2004 that it was now opportune to appraise the implementation of the Trust arrangement and to provide challenge to the way in which the Partnership is working and developing. At this time terms of reference were drafted by ACiW and these were finalised and agreed with the Council in September 2004.

## Objectives and scope

- 5 The objective of this project is to establish whether the Council's arrangements for the implementation of the Leisure Trust have adequately protected its own interests in the key areas of financial accounting, corporate governance and performance monitoring.
- 6 It was agreed that the focus would be upon the Council's own perspective and how it has satisfied itself that arrangements at the Trust are adequate to protect its interests. The key issues to be considered were agreed as:
  - the impact of the Trust upon the Council's finances, including: transfer of assets; treatment of income, expenditure and support services; and consolidation and Charitable Trust issues;
  - arrangements relating to the set up of the Trust and its relationship with the Council;

- the impact that the Trust will have upon the Council (including the consequences of good or bad performance by the Trust);
- the steps that the Council has taken to ensure the Trust has satisfactory arrangements for the management of its systems of internal financial control, and arrangements for the Council to protect its own interests in the event of problems with the Trust's financial systems;
- consistency between the operation of the Trust and the Council's strategic aims and objectives, and the Council's arrangements for ensuring that the performance of the Trust continues to meet these objectives; and
- continuing compliance with WPI and Best Value requirements.

## Approach taken

- 7 The study was conducted during the period September–October 2004 with the main fieldwork being completed onsite on 20 and 21 October.
- 8 Documents were reviewed relating to the formation and ongoing management and monitoring of the Trust – including the Trust's Business Plans for 2003/2004 and 2004/2005, the Council's draft Sport and Active Recreation Strategy (subsequently adopted, in January 2005 as the Sport and Active Living Strategy), actual and anticipated performance standards and Council committee papers.
- 9 Interviews were conducted with the following councillors, trustees and officers of both the Council and the Trust:
  - Councillors C Crowley; D Davies; J Rogers and M James;
  - Ken Sawyers, Chief Executive;
  - Karl Napieralla, Director of Education and Leisure;
  - Hywel Jenkins, Head of Finance;
  - Russell Ward, Head of Lifelong Learning, Culture and Leisure;
  - Andrew Thomas, Coordinator of Indoor Leisure and Sport; and
  - John Powell, Managing Director of CCL.

## Key findings

- 10 The impact of the Trust's operation of the Council's Leisure Services has been largely as anticipated prior to the Trust's operational live date of 1 April 2003. This has been managed by the Council's robust approach to controlling the set-up of the Trust's operational conditions. Solicitors were engaged to represent the Council and some of the legally based control mechanisms included:
  - an annual business plan subject to consultation with and agreement by the Council;
  - a funding agreement between both parties detailing the levels, rate of payment, the purpose of funding and the arrangements for the financial management and monitoring of that funding;

- the lease of land, premises, fixture and fittings including stipulation of both landlord's and tenant's rights, obligations and covenants; and
  - a transfer agreement allowing the formal transfer of Leisure Services, employees and the overall business from the Council to the Trust.
- 11** The former Council Leisure Services had previously achieved Investor in People (IIP) accreditation. This status was not transferable to the Trust at the point of handover in April 2003. However, by November 2004, the Trust had optimised the use of the transferring staff, facilities and systems to successfully achieve IIP status itself.
- 12** The Trust's annual business plan is the key tool used by the two parties to make funding and service level agreements for the year. The Business Plan spells out the Trust's strategic, financial and operational commitments to the Council and also formalises the Trust's ongoing customer service and human resource commitments. The Trust also uses the Business Plan drafting process as the main mechanism for negotiating its funding arrangements for the coming year.
- 13** The principle behind the level of the bid for a fair management fee is that it should, in the first year, fund the shortfall between expenditure and income. The Trust's own strategy for agreeing accurate and fair management fees remains somewhat under-developed and the Trust does not employ a management accountant. As such, the Trust's negotiations for the 2004/2005 contract focuses merely upon that original agreement and not on the principles which the Council always wished to establish:
- trust-led proactive improvement planning and development;
  - mature acceptance of robust challenge by the Council and internally;
  - effective business planning and management; and
  - robust and clear performance management and reporting.

<b>Recommendation</b>	
R1	<p>The Trust should be encouraged to work harder at pitching its bid for management fee and business planning to more closely focus on a mutually supportive partnership, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trust-led proactive improvement planning and development;</li> <li>• mature acceptance of robust challenge by the Council and internally;</li> <li>• effective business planning and management; and</li> <li>• robust and clear performance management and reporting.</li> </ul>

- 14** There remains significant scope within the terms of the management fee agreement for misinterpretation of the funding conditions. The parties agreed at set-up that the Council’s management fee commitment would, from year 2 (ie, 2004/2005) onwards, be reduced by a minimum of 2.5% per annum. However, the Trust calculates its management fee bid by applying the Council’s standard increases to its year on year budgets and as such, rather than showing a reduction of 2.5% against the £2.655m, the actual reduction proposed amounts to just 0.3%. This gap in the parties’ understanding of the terms of negotiation should be closed.
- 15** It was anticipated at the time of establishing the Trust that the Council would be likely to ‘save’ a figure close to £400k per annum by contracting its services to a Trust as the result of the reduction in its National Non-Domestic Rate (NNDR) bill. The Trust initially suggested that a fair share of any such ‘saving’ would be a 50:50 split between the two parties, with the clear intention being to commit its share to re-investment in leisure. However, whilst the Council has been explicit about the actual saving for 2003/2004, the Trust has expressed reservations about the Council’s failure to commit to using these savings to enhance leisure facilities or leisure in its broadest terms. As such, the Trust feels that it is disadvantaged in its negotiating capacity and this could threaten the essence of goodwill, communication and partnership.

<b>Recommendation</b>	
R2	Partners should analyse gaps in their joint undertaking of the terms of their financial arrangements and agree mutually acceptable solutions. An open book approach to this process will prove beneficial and a clearer commitment from the Council to the sharing of savings would be helpful.

- 16** The Council is keen to control any risk associated with transferring its leisure services to the Trust. Reputational risk is a true concern as, although CCL is delivering the services, the community is clear that they are council services. To this end, three councillors hold places on the CCL Board of Trustees and the parties have set in place some key agreements stipulating minimum service requirements and performance standards. These requirements and performance standards commit the Trust to delivering its services in a way that is complementary to the Council’s own corporate objectives and in line with regional and national priorities. The Trust meets its obligations in terms of submitting the appropriate performance data, but the Council cannot be certain of its reliability as no independent auditing is undertaken.

- 17 The Council has failed to take advantage of other opportunities to protect its own interests, develop the Trust’s infrastructure and to encourage the development of a performance culture focusing on customer service. In the 19 months since the formal establishment of the Trust, whilst a corporate governance action plan was agreed and largely delivered between the two parties, the Council’s Internal Audit Team have had no engagement with the Trust’s operation. Such involvement would place the Trust’s structures, systems and processes under fair and legitimate scrutiny as well as protecting the Council’s financial, strategic and reputational interests.

Recommendation	
R3	The partners should agree a structured programme of quarterly internal audits by the Council’s Internal Audit Team – convening with a study of the Trust’s performance information gathering and reporting process.

- 18 The parties made significant efforts to engage with the transferring staff when the Trust was established. In a survey about the transfer, 93% of staff expressed satisfaction with the move and some 113 employees became members of the IPS. Nine staff members were elected to the Board of Trustees and one of them acts as chair of that Board. Significant resources have been invested in helping staff trustees along a steep learning curve and the Trustees have benefited from this investment.
- 19 However, there remain significant weaknesses within the way in which the infrastructure of the Trust’s operation is being managed:
- The quality and extent of leadership within the Trust and the application of strategic management principles is limited.
  - Whilst potential for enterprise and innovation undoubtedly exists amongst the Trust’s Management Team, there is a lack of determination to un-tap that potential and, as a result, management initiative is stifled.
  - The mix of skills and capacity available to the Trust’s management does not supply the best fit for what the Trust currently needs in terms of management accountancy; business development; marketing and project management. These factors have not been successfully tackled.
  - Staff turnover is higher than pre-Trust and trustees and Council Management have serious concerns about deteriorating staff morale.
  - Excessively high levels of sickness absence amongst Trust staff, and in particular as compared to the industry norm, is a source of ongoing concern for trustees, Trust Management and the Council alike. The remedial actions taken thus far have made only limited impact.

- Training and development is poorly and inefficiently targeted.
- The quality, accuracy and reliability of performance information provided by the Trust remains under-developed.
- Service accessibility is compromised in the very competitive market for people’s leisure time by the lack of a Trust website.

<b>Recommendations</b>	
R4	The partners should urgently analyse and evaluate the adverse impacts of the lack of leadership, effective strategic management and the lack of commitment to acquiring, optimising and empowering the right management skills and behaviours to drive improvement.
R5	<p>The partners should urgently form a working group to assess the organisational capacity and skills needs of the Trust. This group should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• involve councillors, trustees and management from both partners;</li> <li>• propose and oversee the implementation of a programme of organisational change designed to equip the Trust with the resources appropriate to the projected trading climate of the coming three to five years;</li> <li>• consider visiting other high performing trust-run leisure services; and</li> <li>• consider consulting the Council’s strong Human Resources service for advice.</li> </ul>

- 20** As a direct result of some of these weaknesses, the Council, which had always intended that the Trust would quickly develop into an arms length operation, has thus far felt unable to allow the Trust to operate with any greater degree of autonomy.
- 21** Furthermore, the partners are missing strategic opportunities to learn more about its customers and their needs and thus to enhance levels of income generated. For example, the Council has largely been responsible for guiding the Trust in developing a business case for the introduction of a leisure card system. Such a card, which would provide the parties with powerful information about its customers and their needs, would require significant investment but thus far, the case being made remains wholly unconvincing.
- 22** Other opportunities are being missed. The Trust has failed to convince the Council of the potential benefits of considering some form of corporate offer to the captive audience which is the Council’s own staff group of some 4,000 people. These missed opportunities are restricting the Trust’s ability to reach its income and participation targets.

Recommendation	
R6	The Trust should be encouraged to take an innovative and robust approach to marketing, business development and income generation. This may involve a skills audit to assess whether the Trust has such capacity within its current resources.

- 23** From the Council's perspective, there are also lessons to be learned about the way the partnership with the Trust should be managed. Whilst a range of opportunities exist through day to day work meetings and formal monthly and quarterly meetings between the partners at management level, there is little evidence of positive impact of any robust challenging approach by the Council. The partners have, as yet, failed to establish a framework for high level meetings involving the Council's Chief Executive and lead member and the Trust's Trustees and managing director. Annual, or initially twice yearly, meetings at such a level would facilitate real challenge in reviewing the past period and setting the performance agenda for the coming 6-12 months. The resulting objectives would therefore be afforded a tangible profile.
- 24** Thus far the Council's approach to managing the Trust has been wholly supportive. Much of the Council's managerial time invested in the Trust in its developmental phase has been spent supporting its initiatives and attempting to gain approval for these within the Council. However, the role of providing a robust challenge to the Trust has not been successful. For the next stage of its evolution, the partnership would benefit from a more hands-off, challenging approach from the Council's Management in order to help the Trust develop the performance culture required by the Council under its WPI and best value obligations and to deliver an enhanced service to local people.
- 25** The councillors who now represent the Council on the board of trustees are all new to the role. Whilst these councillors were given clear strategic roles by the Council in 2003 in respect of their trustee status, these roles still require further development and clarification. Whilst there will always be a balance to strike between their positions as councillors and trustees, there is merit in allocating them a clear brief to robustly challenge the Trust and its partners in the delivery of the Council's Leisure Services. The partners could use a strategic forum of senior management, councillors and trustees meeting perhaps twice yearly to help define and develop these roles.

<b>Recommendation</b>	
R7	The Council must take a more strategic, integrated approach to managing its relationship with the Trust. Twice yearly meetings between partners, senior management, councillors and trustees, and the clarification of challenging roles for both the Council's Leisure Management and councillor trustees are recommended.

- 26** The Council has only secured a limited commitment from the Trust to delivering on its broader goals. Whilst the Trust's Business Plan 2004/2005 makes some attempts to link the Trust's objectives with those of the Council, the Council has failed to convince CCL of the need to contribute to its wider Health and Well-being agenda. Enhanced customer and market knowledge as well as a service level agreement with the Council's Occupational Health Service are examples of potentially beneficial developments which have not been delivered despite the Council's track record of securing the Trust's representation on local forums including:
- the Corporate Health Standard Working Group;
  - Play Working Group;
  - Social Inclusion Working Group; and
  - Disabled Persons Advisory Group.

<b>Recommendation</b>	
R8	The partners should use a robust strategic business development approach to contributing to the Council's Corporate Health and Well-being priority. This will include enhancing their understanding of their customers, potential customers, and the local leisure market place and working more closely with other Council departments eg Occupational Health Service – and other local partners.

- 27** The partners have made best endeavours during the operational life of the Trust to make best use of their capital resources to enhance leisure facilities. Since the inception of the Trust, more funding has been allocated for building maintenance both by the Council, and the Trust than in previous years. In addition, the partners have attracted in excess of £1.1m capital resources from Sportlot Capital Funds and the Welsh Assembly Government local regeneration fund.

- 28** The Council is further able to evidence a strategic, pro-active and co-ordinated approach to safeguarding facilities. For example, the Council brought forward £70k of capital funding to 2003/2004 for remedial works to the roof above the squash courts at the Afan Lido to coincide with major refurbishments and also allocated £53k for comprehensive building condition surveys. However, the partners may be missing opportunities to act more innovatively to source extra finances to enhance facilities - such as working with local business partners, the Crime and Disorder reduction Partnership and others.

<b>Recommendation</b>	
R9	As a matter of high priority, the Council and its partners must seek innovative but realistic and practical solutions for securing significant investment in its leisure facilities.

## Main conclusions

- 29** The steps taken by the partners in establishing the Trust and transferring the Council's Leisure Services to it have generally been robust, well prepared and effectively managed.
- 30** The Council's approach to managing the Trust's activities would be more strategic if it were to effectively use all the mechanisms and relationships at its disposal to provide a critical challenge to the Trust.
- 31** The partners' approach to management accountancy and corporate governance has been somewhat limited; the financial terms of the contract remain open to ambiguous interpretation; little independent auditing of the Trust's activities, systems and processes has been undertaken and the relationship lacks real financial openness. As such an atmosphere of trust has not yet been established and the Council's role of providing challenge has, as yet, failed to produce the necessary impacts to deliver an appropriate level of cultural change.
- 32** Significant weaknesses exist within the Trust's infrastructure in terms of effective strategic management and around its capacity to match the skills and expertise available to current and future business needs.
- 33** The partners have missed opportunities to develop the leisure business such as the development of a business case for a leisure card and a corporate membership scheme for Council staff.
- 34** The Council's approach to managing the Trust has been very supportive in its developmental stages. However, a more strategic, challenging approach will be required if the partnership is to consolidate and reach new, higher goals and thus deliver an enhanced service to the people of Neath Port Talbot. This will mean defining clearer roles and responsibilities for all Council officers and councillors involved in leisure.

- 35** Both the Council and the Trust have expressed significant concern over the high levels of sickness absence. Such factors can severely disrupt service delivery and thus forces the partners to bear reputational risks. The leisure industry norm needs to be used as a benchmark for the future and at present absence is running at higher than that norm. The partners have failed to integrate the efforts and activities of the Trust with associated Council departments such as human resources and occupational health. This represents a significant missed opportunity.
- 36** The Council and its partners have failed to make the most of innovative opportunities to effectively secure extra resources to invest in the fabric of its leisure facilities and this crucial issue has not been given significant priority or profile.

## Appendix 1

## Action Plan

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
5	<p>R1 The Trust should be encouraged to work harder at pitching its bid for management fee and business planning to more closely focus on a mutually supportive partnership, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust-led proactive improvement planning and development;</li> <li>• mature acceptance of robust challenge by the Council internally;</li> <li>• effective business planning and management; and</li> <li>• robust and clear performance management and reporting.</li> </ul>	3	Managing Director CCL CCL Board	Yes	<p>a) The Trust should detail the way in which it intends to improve and develop the services it provides to all the customers. This should be provided in the form of an Action Plan which details the resources to be applied, whose responsibility it is to deliver improvement and an agreed timescale matched against quantified outputs driven by targets.</p> <p>Proposals should be articulated within the Trust's Business Plan and should demonstrate how the objectives of both the Business and the themes of the Community Plan and other high level strategies eg, Health, Social Care and Well-being, Older Persons Strategy are to be achieved.</p> <p>(b) The Trust has to develop a culture throughout the organisation where challenge is readily accepted and positively promoted.</p>	Preparation immediately with revised business planning and reporting format ready and agreed by October 2005. Action plan prepared by June 2005.

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
					(c) The Trust will develop a performance management system which is robust, fit for purpose and above all clearly understood by the Board, management and workforce, and will be used as a tool to take decisions at appropriate for an on how to improve business performance.	
6	R2 Partners should analyse gaps in their joint undertaking of the terms of their financial arrangements and agree mutually acceptable solutions. An open book approach to this process will prove beneficial and a clearer commitment from the Council to the sharing of savings would be helpful.	1	Head of Finance NPT Head of Leisure NPT Managing Director CCL	Yes	Develop a forum where both partners can articulate clearly to Trust Board members their position in terms of reduction in the management fee by means of efficiency savings, and the application of investment funds generated as a result of establishing the Leisure Trust.	June 2005

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
7	R3 The partners should agree a structured programme of quarterly internal audits by the Council's Internal Audit Team – convening with a study of the Trust's performance information gathering and reporting process.	3	Head of Leisure NPT Chief Internal Auditor	Yes	In conjunction with the Director of Finance and Head of Internal Audit develop an agreed programme of audits initially concentrating on any programme will take cognisance of the scope and the role of the Trust's external auditors PricewaterhouseCoopers. Include in the 2005/2006 Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Internal Audit Service work plan.	April 2005
8	R4 The partners should urgently analyse and evaluate the adverse impacts of the lack of leadership, effective strategic management and the lack of commitment to acquiring, optimising and empowering the right management skills and behaviours to drive improvement.	3	Head of Leisure NPT Chair of CCL Board	Yes	A report be made to both the members of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and the Board of CCL outlining the issues of concern. A set of recommendations be developed in partnership to address the skills deficits within the Trust.	July 2005

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	<p>R5 The partners should urgently form a working group to assess the organisational capacity and skills needs of the Trust. This group should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• involve councillors, trustees and management from both partners;</li> <li>• propose and oversee the implementation of a programme of organisational change designed to equip the Trust with the resources appropriate to the projected trading climate of the coming 3-5 years;</li> <li>• consider visiting other high performing trust-run leisure services; and</li> <li>• consider consulting the Council's strong Human Resources services for advice.</li> </ul>	3	Head of Leisure NPT Managing Director CCL	Yes	<p>A working group be established consisting of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 x councillor member trustees – to provide Chair;</li> <li>• 2 x celtic leisure trustees;</li> <li>• co-ordinator for Indoor Leisure;</li> <li>• Head of HR – CCL;</li> <li>• Head of HR – NPTCBC;</li> <li>• Head of Leisure – NPTCBC; and</li> <li>• Managing Director – CCL.</li> </ul> <p>The above working group should develop robust and clearly defined Terms of Reference to deliver the associated recommendation of organisational change. Partners will update the appropriate reporting fora on progress on a regular basis. Arrange visits to best practice sites.</p>	July 2005

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	<p>R6 The Trust should be encouraged to take an innovative and robust approach to marketing, business development and income generation. This may involve a skills audit to assess whether the Trust has such capacity within its current resources.</p>	3	Head of Leisure Managing Director CCL	Yes	<p>The Trust should concentrate its efforts and resources on improving its marketing, business development, potential and subsequently income generation capabilities. Proposals need to be clearly articulated in the form of action plans where resources, responsibilities and targets are clearly identified.</p> <p>In addition, mechanisms needs to be established for proper evaluation of business decisions in terms of the impact on income generation and expenditure those results should be reported at Board Level. The Trust, through appropriate mechanisms will undertake a skills audit at Senior Management level to assess whether the capacity exists within its current structure to maximise its marketing, business development and income generation potential.</p>	Draft developed by July 2005 and agreed for implementation by October 2005

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	R7 The Council must take a more strategic, integrated approach to managing its relationship with the Trust. Twice yearly meetings between partners, senior management, Councillors and Trustees, and the clarification of challenging roles for both the Council's Leisure Management and Councillor Trustees are recommended.	3	Head of Leisure NPT	Yes	Twice a year, the appropriate officers, councillors and trustees from both partner organisations will meet to discuss issues such as strategic priorities, performance management, business planning and resource allocation.  Partners will formally agree the roles of the Council's Leisure Management and Councillor trustees. These roles will be codified and articulated to both the Trust Board and the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee.	July 2005  January 2006

Page	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	R8 The partners should use a robust strategic business development approach to contributing to the Council's Corporate Health and Well-being priority. This will include enhancing their understanding of their customers, potential customers, and the local leisure market place and working more closely with other Council departments eg, Occupational Health Service – and other local partners.	2	Head of Leisure NPT Managing Director CCL	Yes	A robust business case should be prepared by the Trust in order to bid for funding to develop a 'Leisure Card' system. Consideration should be given potential for the use of such technology in complimentary areas of the Authority's services provision ie, E-Learning, Libraries etc.  The Trust will develop services specifically targeted at addressing the Social Objectives of the Authority eg, Crime and Disorder, Improved Health and Well-being and Social Exclusion.	July 2005  October 2005
	R9 As a matter of high priority, the Council and its partners must seek innovative but realistic and practical solutions for securing significant investment in its leisure facilities.	3	Head of Leisure NPT Head of Property and Architectural Services NPT Head of Finance NPT Managing Director CCL	Yes	Based upon the Authority's developing Asset Management Plans and the recent building condition surveys, all options for securing capital investment for the facilities operated by the Leisure Trust to be explored.	Report agreed by January 2006

## Appendix 2

**List of people interviewed**

We met a range of people involved with the service:

Cllr Colin Crowley	Leader of the Council
Cllr John Rogers	Portfolio holder Education and Leisure
Cllr Mike James	Vice chair – Leisure Overview and Scrutiny
Cllr Des Davies	Chair of Leisure Overview and Scrutiny
Ken Sawyers	Chief Executive
Karl Napieralla	Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning
Hywel Jenkins	Head of Finance
Russell Ward	Head of Lifelong Learning Culture and Leisure
Andrew Thomas	Co-ordinator of Indoor Leisure and Sport
John Powell	Managing Director – CCL



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