

# The Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness 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 / Harpers Fitness (LC) by claiming in the local paper "*They are a firm with an excellent reputation.*" A year on and West Devon had issues with LC similar to those of many other local authorities that had used the company and two years on the complaints continued. 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 sufficient penalties to ensure standards.

As the company that once enjoyed the lion's share of municipal leisure contracts LC has had more chances to make mistakes than smaller operators. However this and the fact that LC can point to some successes and satisfied customers does not take

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away from the issues identified here through the Audit Commission inspections, council documents and media reports cited here.

For three 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, meaning that 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 an instance when my complaint card disappeared and another when a new leisure manager found months of unprocessed customer comments when he took over.

Secondly, searching for user complaints has its limitations. The media do not know all complaints that have been made; even quite serious ones escape their attention. Few local papers can spare much time for investigative journalism. Even when papers know about the issues they may not report them or omit significant details. And while search engines trace some of stories about LC on the Internet there is no way of knowing how many others have yet to come to light. Not all reports from local press appear on the web and some of those that do can only be found via a local paper's own web search facility. The efficacy of such online archives is very variable and not all papers have them.

Thirdly, local authority information on leisure complaints is also variable. Councils have a tendency to hide what should or might raise questions about their competence in awarding or managing contracts. LC leisure centres collect complaints but how many of these are closely monitored by council officers? An issue in Brent has been not treating "negative feedback" as complaints.

Council collation of leisure complaints does not happen 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. For example, on two occasions Harrow Council has asked for exorbitant sums for information relating to LC. On one occasion the pretext for this amounted to little more than the files being scattered due to reorganisation. And officials hide behind the commercial confidence that applies to contracts, an area of the FOI Act that needs scrutiny if the law is to achieve its aim of improved accountability.

In short, the items below and on LCW are not the full story. The truth lies somewhere between the dire picture suggested by the matters reported here and on LCW and LC's efforts at public relations. Readers will need to decide which part of the service quality spectrum they think is more typical 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 dealt with the wider problems of companies with multiple contracts. Contractors are not audited and comments on any identified deficiencies are piecemeal and not always easy to tease from the local council's performance. There is also a tendency for the Audit Commission not to name contractors when their failings are identified.

The Sports Council's approach to quality, the QUEST annual inspections and reports, do not provide a reliable guide to decent standards of provision. First of all, QUEST has to be sold to operators of leisure centres. In my opinion this has led to

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pussy-footing in order to make the *product* more attractive to companies at the expense of meaningful standards for users of leisure centres. It is also unfortunate that the administration of QUEST was devolved to a leisure consultancy that at times worked for LC and other leisure contractors. It would have been easy to avoid the potential contract of interest by only allowing tenders for QUEST administration from independent organisations that would not seek such contacts. More worrying is the way in which findings reported by mystery visitors appear not to count for that much when it comes to the final QUEST score, especially when the ratings in question relate to safety. Quest documents are also not always available under FOI, a serious shortcoming given the huge public funding of the Sports Council.

Some material used could fit under more than one heading, but repetition of text has been limited and many additional sources on LCW have not been used in this dossier. The length of the document will not appeal to some. However, it reduces the need for checking back to other documents.

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Italics are used to identify longer pieces. ~~Strikethrough~~ is used to identify URLs that are no longer active, which is perhaps to be expected given that some go back to 2000 or earlier. I have no way of telling which Council links have changed through system updates or standard information retention procedures and which have been removed to spare the blushes of councillors and staff.

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

### **Council Problems with Contracts**

### **[Main Contents](#)**

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 users, council rate payers and national taxpayers who suffer when contracts go wrong. One would hope that decent companies use their experience to avoid deals with the potential to become fraught.

#### Cambourne Contract

On 15.8.07 the Huntingdon Post reported that *Plans for a long-awaited sports centre in Cambourne are thought to be secure despite the company behind the project being put up for sale. At a public meeting in June, Leisure Connection promised (my emphasis) to provide a sports centre in Cambourne by September 2008... It is thought building work will go ahead as planned in October.*

In February 2008 [Cambridge New Online](#) reported on issues delaying the Cambourne Leisure Centre. *Banks hit by the recession have withdrawn from funding a much-delayed sports centre.*

The opening date was again receding into the future with an unspecified part of 2010 touted as “realistic” in the same report.

On 15.8.08 the Huntingdon Post reported that *Plans for a long-awaited sports centre in Cambourne are thought to be secure despite the company behind the project being put up for sale. At a public meeting in June, Leisure Connection promised to provide a sports centre in Cambourne by September 2008... the latest date for*

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*building work to start is now spring 2008... It is anticipated work will ...take a year to complete.*

*The Hunts Post on 4.11.08 announced, ... the developers are now seeking permission from South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) to move the date to December 2009... At a special meeting of Cambourne Parish Council on Tuesday, October 21, parish councillors 'reluctantly agreed' to the new completion date 'to avoid the possibility of losing the sports centre'.*

*David Chare, project director for Cambourne Consortium of Developers, said, "There is now concern by the banks responsible for financing the project through Leisure Connection that SCDC will take action when the sports centre fails to open in March."*

In November 2009 it was announced that with a new partner to replace LC completion in December 2011 was hoped for.

It would appear that involving LC added three years of delay to the opening of the Cambourne Leisure Centre.

### Castle Morpeth Contract

On 5.4.07 the Council received a [report](#) titled " Leisure Connection – The Review of Leisure Facilities". This included the following:

*With the lack of a full set of accounts from 2000 to present day it is not possible to confirm the exact investment by Leisure Connection in repairs, maintenance and decoration. It is clear that over the three year period 2003-06 there is a shortfall in investment and this issue needs to be clarified and addressed with Leisure Connection. p4*

*There are issues with the reporting and the lack of provision of information by Leisure Connection and them failing to fulfil their reporting requirements whilst there has been a failing on the Council's behalf to utilise the open book policy and to undertake a major role in monitoring Leisure Connection's performance. Historically there has been a lack of efficiency on behalf of both parties. p4*

*From the information PMP (consultants who reviewed the contract with LC) was able to get hold of from Leisure Connection it would appear that the company has not been meeting its obligations with regard to Repairs and Maintenance spend as stipulated in the contract. They have also failed to fulfil their reporting requirements and their response times to dealing with problems is painfully slow against their contracted commitments. However, the Council has also failed to "undertake a major role in monitoring (and managing) Leisure Connection's performance. P5*

*Additionally, the flat trend to the Quest Assessments for both centres "would indicate that both leisure centres are just 'ticking over' and not progressing as well as they should or developing their services. p5*

*Additionally customer comments for both centres reflected maintenance and cleanliness issues. p10*

*As a result of the past relationships there is a certain amount of disquiet across the Council and amongst partners concerning Leisure Connection's management of the two centres. Of particular note include:*

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- *a perceived lack of maintenance and investment*
- *poor general housekeeping and time taken to address basic faults*
- *an absence of partnership working and developmental ideas*
- *poor cross marketing and promotion of services*
- *a lack of knowledge about who uses the centres and the role and function they play.* p10

*There has been a total lack of reporting by Leisure Connection (although the contract clearly states what reporting is required), absence of the open-book policy referred to in the contract, which has not been pursued by the Council until very recently, limited provision of audited accounts and therefore little or no opportunity for the Council to apply the payment mechanism and explore the issues of profit share.* p11

*Maintenance liabilities are clear and Leisure Connection is clearly responsible for internal and external decoration, which in the case of Ponteland appears well over due, which is supported by the user consultation undertaken as part of this study. The Council should be seeing clear costed repair and renewal programmes in line with the Financial Model, which requires Leisure Connection to spend £132,640 per annum on repairs and maintenance and as Table 4.1 demonstrates this has not been the case in the past three years. Although it is unlikely that the Council will have any contractual rights to demand retrospective expenditure it would be fair for the Council to question Leisure Connection on the level of expenditure over the past three years based on the poor decoration (at Ponteland Leisure Centre in particular) and agree a way forward for addressing the poor maintenance and decoration to date.* pp11&12

### 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..."*

See also [Hackney Ending](#).

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### 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...*

*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."*

In March 2009 a Council document revealed the Councillors were unhappy with the compensation LC were offering to users after the pool was closed for months due to leaks. The following extracts are from the [document](#).

*On the 17 August 2009 the swimming pool at the Lord Butler Fitness & Leisure Centre was closed due to the fact that it was losing water.*

*Investigations revealed a cracked pipe under the poolside and subsidence in the medium supporting the pipes buried along pool-side*

*The repairs were undertaken and the pool was refilled at a much slower rate than normally recommended. However, unfortunately the pool tank still suffered from thermal shock and the tiles along the expansion joints lifted. Further investigation revealed that the expansion joints needed to be replaced due to the age of the facility. (The pool was built in 2002!)*

*The plan of action was then to have all of the tiles in the pool tap tested and companies were secured to undertake the replacement of the expansion joints and the re-tiling.*

*With regard to a discount package, the Company stated that it would suspend all of the Pure Water (swimming only) memberships and apply a 10% discount to the other Active memberships. Additionally, some of the Active members were identified as using the pool very regularly and a greater discount was negotiated with them. The balance that the Company needs to strike is to provide an appropriate level of discount to satisfy the customers whilst ensuring that it continues to be profitable. (For information, under the PFI agreement there is the requirement for the Council to participate in a small amount of profit share once a certain level of profit is achieved by Leisure Connection Ltd.)*

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*At that stage it was not clear how long the repair work would take so the Company did not indicate the length of time that the discounts would be applied for.*

*The current situation is that the repair work is nearing completion and it is still anticipated that the pool will be re-opening in mid March. On that basis, Leisure Connection Ltd. has confirmed that the Pure Water memberships will be suspended and a 10% discount will be applied, retrospectively, to all Active memberships from September 2009.*

*On the 21 January representatives from Leisure Connection Ltd., and Linteum Uttlesford Ltd. (The LC company set up for the PFI), met with some of the Members of this Committee to discuss the situation regarding the pool and the discount package. Members took the view that the general discount of 10% was insufficient. However, it is recognised that the Company has lost a considerable amount of income due to the pool closure and that not all of the Active memberships use the pool or only use it occasionally.*

The Councillors concern for LC's profits are misplaced. The owners of a PFI facility accept responsibility for the design, build and maintenance. When companies get it right, the profits from PFI can be enormous. The corollary should be that PFI companies take the hit when they get it wrong.

### 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

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*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 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

- *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*

Despite the history of poor performance and pleas from users of Vale Farm the Council signed another contract with LC, which began in November 2006 and was reviewed in September 2007. The following are extracts from the [September Review](#).

*3.4 A key issue officers wanted to see addressed as part of the new contract was that stronger management would be introduced to ensure the service improved. Leisure Connection have made a number of personnel changes within the company during the first six months of the contract both on a local and head office level. None of the main Leisure Connection staff that were involved in the contract negotiations remain and the regional director has also been changed. In addition, as a result of changes in the company structure and for personal reasons, there have been four different managers at Vale Farm Sports Centre since the start of the contract.*

*3.5 It has therefore been necessary for the Sports Service's Recreation Commissioning Team (client officers) to work with and support Leisure Connection and the centre managers to enable them to understand the new contract and embed the changes that the new contract requires. This has taken time and has not resulted in the step change in service that officers had wanted to see from the new contract.*

*3.7 Leisure Connection initially failed to provide the level of staff detailed within their tender submission. This resulted in fewer staffing hours in areas such as lifeguards / recreation assistants, fitness consultants and cleaners...  
Customer satisfaction*

*3.17 It can be seen that the (customer survey) results for 2006 (93% satisfied) showed a significant increase on previous years but have dropped again in 2007 (74% satisfied). On the specific service areas included within the survey satisfaction had dropped in most areas. These results are disappointing and officers are in*

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*discussion with the centre management as to how they intend to address this drop in satisfaction.*

Among the satisfaction scores for different aspects were:

- Overall satisfaction 73.8% (down from 93% in 2006)
- Water quality in the pool 52.0%
- Water temperature in the pool 52.9%
- Cleanliness of the changing areas 48.2%

### 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 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.*

On 6.1.11 the Harrow Times [reported](#), on the proposed renewal of Leisure Connection's contract with Harrow Council.

*Safety issues and poor standards of showers, toilets and hand dryers sparked a spate of complaints and the manager of the Harrow contract was removed from his post in August on the request of Harrow Council. Officers labelled the employee's performance 'unacceptable' but say communication with residents has increased under the new leadership and complaints are said to have dropped.*

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LC transferred the manager complained about, Adam Nash, to manage a leisure centre in Spelthorne. Councillors ignored the recommendations of Officers and a new contractor took over the borough's leisure facilities in May 2011.

### 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 continuing 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 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*

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*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. £103,533.38 owed to Council and in [May 2007](#) LC was the second highest debtor.

### 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 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**

### [Main Contents](#)

These are reports of contracts that ended with bad feelings. One might expect other councils not listed immediately below have also been pleased to see the back of LC.

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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

The 15 year contract, which stated in 2002, was terminated by "mutual agreement". This followed, among other things, much public dissatisfaction with service within the building when it was open. A [consultation](#) with the public published in March 2005 noted:

*The feedback given by members of the public made it clear that users were not experiencing a satisfactory level of customer service. There were many comments about poorly trained staff, long queues at reception, problems booking classes, centre not opening on time, low staffing levels, poor monitoring of facilities, lack of information and inaccurate information, and poor signage. It was also felt that there was misuse of facilities in that people who had not paid to use the saunas, for example, were getting in without being stopped, and that anti-social behaviour such as eating and shaving in the health suite was not being challenged by the management. There were also comments about poor cleanliness and hygiene in many areas of the centre, including swimming and changing areas and squash courts. It was felt that maintenance of all areas was poor and that the lines of accountability between the Council and the operating company were unclear in this area. There was a great deal of positive feedback about the quality of swimming lessons and exercise classes.*

### Swale Ending

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*

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Officers. *The Head of Technical Services explained that the current leisure contract would expire in September 2004 and new contractors were being sought...*"

### Daventry Ending

In June 2010 the Daventry District Council Scrutiny and Improvement Committee received the [Report of the Task and Finish Panel on Leisure Centre Maintenance](#), which commented on issues arising from the end of LC's contract in October 2006.

Extracts from the report include:

*Under S7.4 (of the contract) there was provision for the building to be surveyed two months prior to the end of the contract and for the contractor to put right any defects at its own expense. It is not clear to the Panel how these provisions were intended to interact with the cost sharing mechanisms in clauses S2.7.4 and S2.7.5 outlined above.*

*The Leisure Connection contract included provision of a performance bond to a maximum value of £150,000.*

*There is evidence, in the form of the requirements on the Council to restore items set out in the SOLL contract ... that the Leisure Centre was not handed over by Leisure Connection in the state required.*

*Client-contractor meeting minutes also indicate that various items of remedial work were identified and Leisure Connection undertook to address them e.g. the pool underwater lights. It is also apparent that at least some of these works were not actually undertaken.*

*Whilst maintenance inspections did take place, the Panel's view is that these were not as often as would have been desirable, and that a significant difficulty was ensuring that the contractor actually carried out the maintenance required.*

*At and after the end of the contract the condition of the Leisure Centre was a matter of dispute between the Council and Leisure Connection. Some remedial work was carried out by Leisure Connection but officers of the Council believed that Leisure Connection was responsible for additional items. After what appear to have been forceful but largely fruitless negotiations the Council claimed £96,413.82 from the performance bond... The £96,413.82 represented just under two-thirds of the maximum sum which could be claimed; it has been explained to the Panel that this was the maximum figure officers, taking advice from QMP, felt could be justified as demonstrably being due to Leisure Connection's failure to fulfil its maintenance obligations.*

*Taking these matters into account, the Task and Finish Panel finds that:*

*It is apparent that Leisure Connection had not maintained the building in the condition it was required to, and that the Council had been unable to ensure that it did so. Given the complexity of the provisions of the agreement it is unclear to what extent this resulted in additional cost to the Council, but clearly such a position is undesirable.*

## Health & Safety

## [Main Contents](#)

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. The number and sometimes the types of H&S issues involving LC centres provides significant cause for concern.

### Maldon H&S

In June 2008 Michelle Geldon, aged seven, died following use of the pool at Blackwater Leisure Centre. At the time of writing no official investigations have reported as to the factors involved. However, in August her parents announced that they were suing Leisure Connection. On 9.9.08 the family's solicitor, Peter Todd of Hodge, Jones and Allen, issued a press release that included;

*Michelle Gellard drowned at Blackwater Leisure Centre on 14 June 2008. Michelle was found unconscious at the deep end of the pool by a member of the public. The family contends that:*

- *Lifeguards failed to notice Michelle get into difficulty at the deep end of the pool.*
- *Inaccurate information given by leisure centre staff to the emergency services caused the urgency of the response to be substantially downgraded, resulted in a significant delay (currently unknown but estimated at between 15 and 30 minutes).*

*Two calls were made to emergency services.*

- *First call: A member of staff from the leisure centre reports an "unconscious child" who is choking. They do not say she has been found under water or that it is a drowning incident. The caller then says that they have been told that the child is "ok" and is now "conscious". The ambulance service says an ambulance is on the way, but downgrades the response as a result of the information.*
- *Second call: The caller wants to know why no ambulance has attended and makes clear that Michelle has been rescued from the swimming pool but that she is not breathing or conscious. There is a discussion about the fact that no defibrillator is available and no-one qualified to resuscitate young children is available.*

While investigations continued into the drowning the HSE in July 2010 discovered insufficient lifeguard cover at the Blackwater Leisure Centre and issued an [Immediate Prohibition Notice](#). Such notices are served when there is a risk of a serious injury.

### Ely /East Cambridgeshire H&S

On 29.9.10 the Ely Standard [reported](#) under the headline "Investigations uncovered 'serious problems' at Ely pool."

*The company in charge of a swimming pool in Ely came under fire from council health inspectors for its poor safety record and litany of complaints from swimmers,*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*documents obtained by the Ely Standard have revealed. Environmental officers at the district council visited the Paradise Pool on Newnham Street on 13 occasions last year following complaints from members of the public about poor water quality and skin irritation after visits to the pool.*

*Freedom of Information documents obtained this week show that the authority's senior environmental health officer Pamela Pope was eventually forced to issue two prohibition notices against the managers of the pool, Leisure Connection Ltd, due to a serious risk of personal injury arising from excess chlorine in the pool.*

*In a report to a council management team last year, Mrs Pope said that investigations carried out by the council uncovered "serious problems with health and safety management at the pool," with "deficiencies at all levels of the management structure."*

*In her report Mrs Pope highlighted cases of sore eyes and skin irritation after visits to the pool and also noted an incident involving a pair of swimming shorts which had changed colour after exposure to the water...*

But the Ely Standard's report left out significant details from the FOI documents including:

Physical Injuries Due to Excessive Chlorine - several swimmers claimed their eyes, skin and mouths had been irritated while swimming in June of 2009. One complainant also stated that the pool water not only turned her son's trunks from blue to brown but also caused peeling of his genitalia.

On June 9, a Senior Environmental Health Officer closed the main pool citing over-chlorination and also closed the small pool for not having enough chlorine. She also referred to a lack of skilled personnel in both notices of closure.

Incompetent Manager - Ms Pope wrote that during a visit at the time of water problems the manager at that time was unable to test the level of chemicals in the pool water and that he asked a junior member of staff for help. The reading then taken was different from what had been recorded previously by the company. The implication is clear, the manager did not know how to test the water.

Manager Lied - Ms Pope's letter also says that the manager lied to her and another council officer on June 10th when he claimed LC's Technical Manager had visited the pool and found tablets used for testing to be faulty.

Further Warnings - Ms Pope wrote a further prohibition notice following her visit to the pool on 18 September. The accompanying letter refers to chemicals added to the pool by hand "in a manner which involves a serious risk of injury". On 2 October 2009, an improvement notice followed visits after "complaints to this service, an accident report, and a subsequent visit to the premises when chlorine appeared to be minimal / absent from the trainer pool." The improvement notice said that the equipment for controlling water quality "is not routinely maintained" resulting in under-dosing of disinfectant and microbiological contamination in one pool and over-dosing in the other. Two further letters by Ms Pope relating to maintenance and lack of skilled staff were sent on 6 November and 23 December.

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

[Because East Cambridgeshire sent the FOI documents in a form that does not allow for the copying text characters, the files are very large. I copied key extracts from the files into a [press release](#). Alternatively, the [originals](#) can be downloaded.

### Lee Valley H&S

On 7.12.07 the Hertfordshire Mercury reported, "A mum has sounded the alarm over filthy conditions at the Lee Valley Leisure Pool after spotting bloodstains in a changing room used by her toddler. Victoria Greffon, 36, claims conditions at the swimming pool in Broxbourne have been deteriorating for a year and a half and nothing is being done about it. She said she has not seen cleaning staff for months and the duty manager refuses to speak to her."

The reporter, Dan Peters, followed up the story with Freedom of Information requests. On 15.2.08 he reported:

*High-levels of bacteria and too much chlorine in the water have been reported in Broxbourne's Lee Valley Leisure Pool... A high bacterial count during the last microbiological test is recorded in December's report. Swimmers were also exposed to the risk of eye or skin irritation, or breathing problems, due to high chlorine levels, which are recorded the two consecutive months last year.*

*In addition, faults were identified with the way in which chemical levels were measured. The reports also revealed it took more than three months for a discussion on repairing a broken pump to be actioned...*

*Concerns about customer care, phone answering, cleanliness and catering came out of the (Quest inspection) mystery visit... Minutes of meetings held between the authority and Leisure Connection highlight a number of health and safety issues. One minute expressed 'grave concern that the staff do not have any access to mannequins', a crucial piece of equipment used in the training of lifeguards.'...*

*Other problems raised included lifeguards chatting while carrying out water tests, no evidence of safety checks being carried out on the gym equipment and the absence of a backup domestic hot water system, which would force the centre to close if the main unit failed.*

*Staffing and training worries have also been raised consistently over the past year. One minute noted they was staffing cover for just 30 out of 100 hours in the gym in December and another read; "While KF was on annual leave, unfortunately he was let down by his staff in keeping the standards of the pool to an acceptable standard."*

*A monitoring report indicated that 'training seemed sporadic' and the inability to find a list of staff trained use one piece equipment meant everyone had to be retrained.*

### 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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*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 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.*

The officer 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*

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*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."*
- *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.*

### Great Yarmouth H & S

From a Council Review of the Marina Centre January 2004: "Several users were concerned over the standard of training received by the lifeguards, stating that

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*lifeguards just sat on poolside chairs and did not patrol the area. Messages sent over the public address system were incomprehensible...*

*"Concern was also expressed about the way emergencies were handled and during a recent alarm children were left in only swimwear, cold and unattended beside the pool with no guidance as to what to do and no towels/blankets provided."*

### Brent H & S

Despite the Council noting its disappointment at the end of the first year of a new contract for Vale Farm, 2008 saw scandalous incidents at the Sports Centre.

An Improvement Notice under the Health and Safety at Work Act was served on LC in relation to water quality and the water testing regime at Vale Farm "Due to the seriousness of this situation and the potential for harm".

*During the visit I witnessed various water tests being undertaken by yourself and a colleague. The results of these tests suggested a serious problem regarding the quality of the water in the pool. It was found that the total dissolved solid (TDS) reading, taking into account chemical and pollutants in the water, was 2600mg/l for the main pool and 6000mg/l for the learner pool. The industry code of practice recommends that the maximum TDS level should be 1000mg/l above the mains water supply which at Vale Farm Sports Centre was found to be 500mg/l.*

The Officer gave as her reasons for the Improvement Notice: *...the levels of total dissolved solids, including chemicals and pollution, are far higher than recommended in the main swimming pool and exceedingly high in the learning pool and as thus may potentially affect the safety of bathers ... This situation appears to have been allowed to continue or to reoccur for some time despite the fact that these levels could adversely affect the safety of bathers, as per readings taken during a microbiological test in March.*

One might hope that after such a rocket, the testing regime would improve. On the contrary, another dangerous situation was discovered just a few weeks later and the two pools had to be closed on 24 April for several days.

The Wembley Observer reported on 20.11.08 that the pool *... which was closed down because of dangerously high chlorine readings did not have proper chemical monitoring procedures in place... Staff at Vale Farm Sports Centre, in Wembley, were not properly trained and used out of date tablets to test for chlorine...*

*Emails between the council's environmental health department and Leisure Connection also revealed how record sheets used for chlorine monitoring were 'not fit for purpose', how the pools management systems lack robustness and that no checks we made on the quality of testing staff were carrying out.*

*Before the closure Leisure Connection was served with a Health Improvement Notice for having exceedingly high levels of pollution and chemicals in the both the main and junior pools. And in the emails the environmental officer suggested that failure to respond to this notice contributed to the chlorine incident.*

An email written by an Environmental Health Officer about the excess chlorine soon after the incident and obtained under FOI stated:

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*In general the results don't just rise sharply. The gradual rise should have been observed. Because of some of the above failures this did not take place. At this point I stated that for all I know these figures could just be made up. This might be a strong possibility...*

*It is clear that the Improvement Notice (re excess solids in pool) was forwarded to Head Office whose response was to appeal the notice and inform Vale Farm to undertake monitoring. At ground level LC had read the covering letter but no one had actually read the notice to see what it entailed. It covered chemicals and pollution (all result of over chlorination and attempts to neutralise and compensate).*

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.*

It is not clear what issues were identified, but some time after this the number of lifeguards attending the two main and learner pools for early morning swimming was increased to two.

### Ealing H&S

In September 2005 Gurnell Pool had a Mystery Visitor, as part of it QUEST inspection. In the QUEST Report the Visitor noted:

*There was one Lifeguard to the side of the Main Pool using the high chair provided. The standards of supervision appeared conducive to customer safety; however, one Lifeguard for a Pool containing approximately 20 swimmers could be called into question."*

As the pool has an area of 1150 m<sup>2</sup> the number of lifeguards certainly should be questioned and more forcibly than QUEST managed. In the 2003 HSE guidance in "Managing Health & Safety in Swimming Pools" the minimum number of lifeguards for a pool of 1000 m<sup>2</sup> is 4.

There is another QUEST report on Acton Pool from December 2005. The Mystery Visitor's report noted:

*There was one lifeguard on the Poolside for the duration of the Visit. The centre was operated generally in a safe manner with good supervision of customers and activities from Lifeguards on duty ... After the first Lifeguard rotation the new Lifeguard initially sat in the chair adjacent to the Pool. After a short while he stood up and started to read the Pool timetable leaflet. During this five-minute period the Lifeguard did not supervise the Pool appropriately with only an occasional glance at the pool.*

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The main part of the QUEST report notes; *"From various conversations with Staff ... it appears that NPLQ (National Pool Lifeguard Qualification) training has not been carried out, the training files also evidenced this. The centre is aware of this and is in the process of addressing the situation."*

The NPLQ training is mandatory for continued recognition of lifeguarding qualifications.

### Wymondham H&S

South Norfolk District Council produced a report called "Mystery Customer Visitor - Wymondham Leisure Centre June / July 2005". This includes:

*"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.*

### Wigston H&S

Wigston Swimming Pool received a QUEST "Maintenance Mystery Visit" in September 2004. The report noted:

*"...two members of Staff on poolside... both observed the pool from the same position, one in the Lifeguard chair and the other standing to the side. Although attentive the lifeguards were in constant conversation. Worryingly when the receptionist called a Lifeguard over to the Poolside door, both members of Staff left their observation point and then entered into dialogue with the receptionist. At this stage observation of the Pool was minimal by both members of staff.*

Under "Other potential Health & Safety /security issues" were listed:

- *no supervision or check on entry to the Fitness Suite. I was allowed to enter the room un-challenged*
- *local school children entering the building and roaming unsupervised and unchallenged*
- *Reception left unattended for approximately 5 minutes. During this time numerous people entered the building and passed through the Reception area unchallenged. Security of goods and cash was non-existent at this time.*

### Harrow H&S

On October 23 2008, the Harrow Times [reported](#) that Sergeant Davis, in his submission to the licensing panel (considering renewal of a licence for Byron Hall), wrote: *"It has consistently been apparent that the premises attracted criminality. The management of these premises by the licence holders has ensured the failure to take appropriate steps to prevent crime and disorder, prevent public nuisance, promote*

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*public safety and failed to promote the objectives of the protection of children from harm...*

*Sergeant Davis said the Leisure Connection staff who attended the hearing were embarrassed they had to be there and he called on Harrow Council to rapidly improve the management of Byron Hall and Harrow Leisure Centre.*

*He said: "Leisure Connection has consistently stalled, dithered, dawdled and smokescreened to avoid putting in extra security measures. They are quite happy to take the money of residents of Harrow, but where has the money been spent?"*

### **Poor Cleaning & Other Hygiene Issues**

[Main Contents](#)

There are probably more complaints about cleaning at LC managed centres than anything else and they have persisted for at least a decade. I began Leisure Connection Watch largely because it appeared LC felt it could ignore complaints about lack of cleaning at Vale Farm in Brent.

Sometimes members of the public are at fault for littering and worse, but part of running a public facility is cleaning up whatever mess is left. But it is not just routine cleaning. What is known as *deep cleaning* is also often lacking as far as councils and others are concerned. It is hard not to draw the conclusion that where contracts are not well specified and monitored and significant penalties a real threat, LC has put often put profits ahead of consistent standards of cleaning.

### Wigston & Oadby Cleaning & Hygiene

On 15.9.07 The [Leicester Mercury](#) reported, *A company running council-owned swimming pools has been fined for failing to clean them properly. Council bosses say the problem at the Oadby and Wigston swimming baths led to the resignation of a pools manager. Oadby and Wigston Borough Council took the action against Leisure Connection after investigating complaints from users about the pools.*

*People had complained about the cleanliness and state of repair of the pools as well as the changing rooms. The firm was fined a total of £2,500 for the problems, which dated back to March and April this year...*

*A council report said: 'The senior contracts manager's inquiries revealed that the problems were largely a result of poor management on site.... "*

*Ruth Arnold, who is a coach for Oadby and Wigston swimming club, said both pools had been in a poor condition. She said they were neither clean nor properly maintained with problems like a door missing off a toilet left for months before being fixed. She said: 'All the major things have been addressed, probably since the fine. But it's not as clean as you would like it - there's general grubbiness.'*

*Alison Blissett, 28, from Fleckney, uses Wigston pool with her two children Georgia, six, and Lattisha, four. She said: 'I've noticed it getting worse and worse over the past year. The toilets are dirty, there's water everywhere and the shower cubicles are absolutely disgusting. "I make my children go to the toilet before they leave the house because it's so dirty here. It was particularly bad in March and April but I would not really say that it had got any better.'*

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### Lambeth Cleaning & Hygiene

The [South London Press](#) reported on 13.3.07 under the headline "Filthy leisure centre under closure threat" on issues as LC's contract in Lambeth drew to a close.

*A popular leisure centre has become so dilapidated it will be forced to close in two weeks unless new owners can save it, users fear. They say the filthy swimming pool, mouldy walls and ageing gym equipment at Streatham Leisure Centre have forced scores of users to cancel their subscriptions and several staff to leave.*

*Streatham user group representative Bridged Hall, 48, blamed Lambeth council for months of neglect and uncertainty over the centre's future. She said: 'It's got to the point now where there's hardly any staff left. To get a lunch break the lifeguard has to swap with the receptionist. It's astounding that such a well-used centre has been allowed to get into this state. The pool is filthy, the showers don't work and there's mould growing on the walls of the dance studios...*

### Easington Cleaning & Hygiene

The Peterlee Star on 15.2.07 reported, "Leisure centre bosses have had a second warning over cleanliness standards. Scrutiny chiefs at Easington District Council issued an official notice to Leisure Connections, following an inspection at Peterlee Leisure Centre. It came after a warning previously sent to the firm, which runs the district's leisure complexes, about cleanliness at Seaham.

*The council said the problems were put right in the allocated time on both occasions and there was no need for a further default notice - which at its most serious could result in termination of a contract. Paul Irwin, the council's senior cultural development officer, said in a report: "Discussions have been held with the company to ensure standards are maintained."*

*Coun William Peardon, who represents Deneside, took part in the last inspection at Seaham Leisure Centre. "Half of the machines were out of order, the carpets were poor, the ashtrays were full, and the kitchens were deplorable."*

### South Kesteven Cleaning & Hygiene

On 23.8.07 the [Grantham Journal](#) reported, Swimmers are fed up with the Grantham Meres Leisure Centre, claiming the swimming timetable is unreasonable and the facilities dirty. Marge Roberts, of Range Road, and Brian Elrick, of Alexandra Road, have started a petition because they feel the public's swimming time during the school term has been dwindled down to make way for swim clubs. They feel children are missing out, with few opportunities for them to use the pool during the week after school.

*Brian, who uses the pool three times a week, said: "We have found that the swimming clubs are having more time than we are. I would like a bit more consideration for adult swimming and general swimming."*

*Dirty nappies in the changing room are a common sight, according to Marge, and she has also witnessed excrement on the floor. She said: "My daughter got out of the pool and went into the changing room at about 6.30 one evening, and found poo on the floor."*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*"South Kesteven District Council asset and facilities manager Paul Stokes said: "Apart from Mrs Roberts, we have only received one other complaint about timetabling. We are working with our contractor Leisure Connection to maintain and improve service to the public."*

On 20.11.09 the Grantham Journal [reported](#) further under the headline, "The Meres Leisure Centre is branded 'a filthy, smelly, vile, unruly'".

*Readers are fed up to the back teeth with conditions at Grantham's Meres Leisure Centre. They say it's filthy, smelly and overrun with unruly kids. So the Journal went undercover to find out the truth - and showed the evidence to leisure centre bosses. Over the past five weeks, the Journal has gone at varying times three times a week armed with a camera and notebook to record its findings.*

*We found a litter-strewn changing room, mouldy shower heads and teenage jobs running riot. The stench of urine in the changing room was sometimes overwhelming, the pool temperatures felt cold and the jacuzzi and adjoining splash pool were open only once... Leisure centre bosses have now vowed to make improvements before Christmas.*

### 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.*

Concern continued and a Health & Safety [inspection report](#) of Hatch End Pool in August 2005 revealed numerous failings including pool water looking very dirty with dead algae, in part linked to lack of a pool vacuum on site.

In June 2007 Council officers [reported](#) on an audit of leisure centres managed by LC. The findings stated that, *In the short term, many of the items identified for attention form part of the normal day to day task of managing this type of facility e.g. cleaning and removal of waste....*

*Among the hygiene issues noted were; Corridor floor dirty with food debris and dust. Heavy smell of mould and yeast; poor ventilation. All sinks dirty. 2 soap dispensers without soap. Rancid oil left open in container. Dry, dirty pungent smelling cloth in food sink. Thick dust and grease visible on extractor fan filter. Lobby between fire doors accumulating litter. Broken glass on floor. Toilet dirty. Debris from old spilt food on work surfaces.*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

Further issues were identified at Harrow Leisure Centre in 2009. The Harrow Times [reported](#) on 22.7.09 under the headline, "Harrow Leisure Centre slammed for health and safety risks".

*The inspections at Harrow Leisure Centre found dirty sinks and toilets, week-old layers of oil and fat on kitchen cookers, broken fire doors, and litter and cigarette butts strewn around the electrical plant room... An official audit, dated April 24, states: 'The kitchen for public hire was extremely dirty and ill-kept. There were also clear breaches of food hygiene rules and codes of good practice.' It adds: 'Lack of quality systems was a feature of the last visit...'*

### 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](#) reported *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 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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

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 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...*

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

### 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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

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.*
- *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.*

### Ely / 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 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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*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.*

*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 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?

A year later the [Cambridge Evening News](#) reported that the centre had dispensed with "a 20-hours-a-week cleaner " and lifeguards were now undertaking cleaning. There was no explanation as to when or why the cleaning hours had reverted to 20 before the dedicated cleaner had been replaced.

In August 2010 The Cambridge News carried the following [report](#) under the headline, Pool is disgrace, say parents who vow to stay away.

*Parents are boycotting a swimming pool after describing its condition as disgusting. The leisure pool at the Paradise swimming complex in Ely has finally reopened after months of work but swimmers have inundated the News with complaints about mould around the pool, a stench of urine and clumps of hair littering floors in changing rooms...*

*...parents turned up at the pool this week to find the changing rooms and areas of the pool in a "disgusting" state. A mum-of-two, who has complained to the council following her visit with her children aged 5 and 3, said: "The council should be ashamed of that place. The changing rooms absolutely stank of urine and there was black mould around the side of the pool. There's no way I'm going back there – swimming pools and changing areas should be hygienic places, not filthy. It's about time the place was given a good clean-up, either that or knocked down."*

*Emma Jenkins, from Little Downham, said she was horrified after visiting the pool with her 7-year-old son. She said: "Are the staff there not made to clean every day? The changing rooms and everywhere in general is dirty. Something needs to happen before everyone stops going there."*

*A 29-year-old mother-of-one said: "I will never return there, we should not put up with such disgusting facilities."*

*...The district council confirmed "numerous" complaints had been made.*

### 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:

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

- Dirty or other drain issues on six occasions
- Overdue or no evidence of backwashing (pool water treatment to filter out dirt) on six occasions
- 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

Two years after the contract there were still issues. On 14.9.06 [Tavistock Today](#) reported. *The owners and managers of Tavistock's Meadowlands swimming pool this week admitted 'urgent improvements' were required to bring the facility up to scratch...* following "...recent articles ... in which pool users slammed standards of cleanliness at the pool and sloppy maintenance... dirty changing rooms, damaged lockers, showers that did not work properly and erratic water temperatures.

Bizarrely, LCs regional manager was quoted as claiming: *"We are the beginning of a ten-year contract..."* even though LC had been operating the centres for two years and the issues were well understood and documented at least a year before.

### 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**

### [Main Contents](#)

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

On 5.3.03 [Eastcoast 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.*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

Such issues prompted the council to produce the "Review of the Marina Centre" Report in January 2004. This includes the following:

*Members were advised that in October 2002 Leisure Connection Plc had been instructed to prepare a repair/maintenance programme but this, unfortunately, had yet to appear. It was further reported that Leisure Connection continued to challenge the management agreement with regard to the clause that places responsibility on them to finance the repair/replacement of plant where the material costs were higher than £2,948... A new plant engineer had recently been appointed but only on a part-time basis. When the plant was maintained by the Borough Council, two full time engineers were employed. It was not possible for a part-time engineer carry out all the responsive and planned maintenance for such a large site...*

*The Head of Environmental services explained that it was fair to say that the internal appearance of the Marina Centre had seen some improvement but, unfortunately, it was still the case the Borough Council had to continue to "badger" Leisure Connection on a regular basis to get the necessary works carried out...*

*To date, no evidence has been produced that preventative maintenance is taking place... "A letter has been sent to Leisure Connection Plc stating that this Authority will not bear the cost of repairing or replacing items of plant that have not been regularly maintained.*

### 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.*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*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 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.' ...*

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

On 31.3.05 Spalding Today [reported](#), that Celia Fitton confirmed the women's side was no better. *"My main gripe is with the changing rooms. The lockers are abysmal*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*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...*

### 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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*equipment to ensure that it is electrically safe. All equipment should be maintained by a competent person to ensure that it is safe.*

### Ealing Maintenance

The QUEST 2005 report on Gurnell Pool gave a rating of 6 out of 10 under the heading of Maintenance. The two weakest sub-scores within this were for planned preventative work and *work carried out by trained and competent personnel*. It was also noted that *Training of the relevant duty manger for maintenance has yet to be completed.*

The QUEST Report for Acton Pool in 2005 scored 7 out of 10 for Maintenance. The sub-heading "Planned preventative maintenance and inspection programmes are implemented" received a rating of 2 out of 4, meaning *not fully implemented*. It was noted that the management team did *...not have a schedule of what the main contractor are going to do and when. Also they receive little or no feedback from the contractor that works have been carried out.*

### Wokingham Maintenance

The Quest report for Carnival Pool in 2005 scored 7 out of 10 for Maintenance. The sub-heading "Planned preventative maintenance and inspection programmes are implemented" received a rating of 2 out of 4. The report noted: *Whilst a number of (planned preventative programme) contracts appeared to be in place there was little evidence to show that these were being monitored effectively... The corrective Action Log contained a prioritisation system to enable identification of Health and Safety defects. This system was not being used.*

The QUEST Report for St Crispins Leisure Centre in 2005 scored 7 out of 10 for Maintenance but yet again the sub-heading "Planned preventative maintenance and inspection programmes are implemented" received a rating of 2 out of 4. It was noted that the management team did *...not have a schedule of what the main contractor are going to do and when. Also they receive little or no feedback from the contractor that works have been carried out."*

## **Staffing Issues**

## **[Main Contents](#)**

### 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 / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*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...*

### Great Yarmouth Staffing

From the 2004 [Council Report](#) cited above: *“In general, the greatest concern of users is the lack of staff available and also the failure of the Marina Centre to book the customers properly... concern has been expressed that complaints have not been dealt with seriously, especially those regarding thefts from lockers. In addition, several users have expressed concern about the security of the premises in general.”*

### 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...*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*“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.”*

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*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*spokesperson said that to ensure safe use of the Aquazooms it 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."*

### Wokingham Staffing

Despite all of the above staffing issues in the summer of 2006 LC, abetted by Proudfoot Management Consulting, began a programme of cutbacks of leisure centre staff unconvincingly called the "Customer First Review".

The [Wokingham District Council Leisure Management Contract Quarterly Review Summary Report, May – July 2006](#) makes clear the impact on what the council referred to as a "breach of contract" for failure to consult.

*Issues concerning recommendations from consultants have been at the forefront this quarter. LC didn't communicate with WDC regarding any changes. WDC still have concerns regarding areas where staff reductions have taken place and there are not adequately trained staff to facilitate these areas e.g. cafeteria. WDC will continue to carry out a weekly monitoring programme at Loddon Valley Leisure Centre until it is satisfied that LC are meeting the needs of their customers...*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

*LC's Head office need to be aware of what is happening at local management level and how their decisions can have a major impact on customers. Further monitoring and supervision of the wetside facilities (Carnival and LVLC) is required, as the current cleaning standards are not acceptable...*

In the "Contractor's Comment" appended to the report, the local LC managers have noted, "A fair report based on the issues with communication above site level..."

Following discovery of the cuts Wokingham issued a default notice on 18 July 2006. This included, *It is also not acceptable to have the contracts manager working in the cafeteria whilst he is suppose to be in meetings. The requirement is for Leisure Connection to give WDC assurances that the cafeteria will be in FULL operation immediately. If this is not achieved further defaults will be issued.*

### Mole Valley Staffing

Further insights into the crude nature of the cuts made as part of LC's 2006 nation-wide "Customer First Review" come from an email sent by a Mole Valley leisure officer to Paul Burns on 12.10.06.

*We were first informed by Leisure Connection of the 'efficiency savings' in June 2006. This was following 6-8 weeks of Proudfoot consultants looking at all aspects of how the centre operates, this included interviews with staff members, sitting and watching various sessions and looking at the flow of customers through the centre.*

*Their conclusions were that there were too many staff on duty at certain times of the day. But what they didn't do was to do the research at different times of the year and different times of the day or sunny days as apposed to wet days. The other minor detail that Leisure Connection failed to tell us was that Proudfoot are not leisure consultants.*

*Following the report, we were then told that staff cuts would be made mainly to the reception and the gym. We were not particularly happy about this as we have always thought that LC have not staffed the building sufficiently, so to cut staff seemed ridiculous. After the initial announcement, it was clear that the problem had been compounded. Customers were calling me saying they couldn't get through on the phones, there were huge queues on reception and they couldn't get what they wanted. This went on for two weeks, after which I explained to LC that they were to re-instate the staff hours because it was having an effect on service delivery. This was done and there was also talk about investing in some more gym staff.*

*Things did improve after this but then the summer was upon us and we started having further problems with not enough cover on reception and on poolside, resulting in some days the learner pool being closed because they could not staff it and one receptionist being abandoned for hours lone working. As a Council we stepped in again and explained that they were there to manage the facility and provide a service, something that they clearly were not doing. Once again things did improve but then culminated in August with us having to issue default points...*

### 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

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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 (or previously managed) 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 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*

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*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.'*

*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....'*

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...*

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### 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 ... 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...*

*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...’*

*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. (The full Code is no longer available to the public from the FIA website, only a [brochure](#) about it.) Section 4 of the FIA 2004 code included *Ensure that any written contracts for members are in accordance with The Office of Fair Trading's... Guidance.*

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness 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 in Harrow and the extracts below are taken from it.

<b>Contract Term</b>	<b>What's is wrong with it</b>
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 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 LC's plan to restructure their staffing, including Harpers gyms. One consequence of this restructuring was that "full supervision" ended and there would be times when no member of staff would be present while customers were exercising. This was a significant, unilateral variation of contract introduced without meaningful notice to Harper members.

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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. FIA acknowledged the complaint. Despite reference to several sections of the OFT Guidance that appeared to have been breached by LC, as of May 2011 the FIA have not responded to the 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 protecting the interests of a major member rather than those of fitness customers.

### **Social Disturbance**

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#### Oadby Disturbance

*On 21.8.08 the Leicester Mercury reported that, Residents have celebrated a crucial victory in a 17-year battle against noise from a leisure centre. People living near Parklands leisure centre, in Oadby, have complained since 1991 about noise when events such as weddings are staged at the venue, saying it was "destroying" their lives. They have been unhappy with efforts by Leisure Connection, which runs the Wigston Road centre, and Oadby and Wigston Borough Council, to control the problem. However, at a borough council licensing hearing on Monday, it was agreed that an independent sound consultant would be appointed to work with the residents and the leisure company over the next six months to tackle the problem.*

#### Harrow Disturbance

Leisure Connection operate Byron Hall near to the Harrow Leisure Centre, which is also under their management. On 20.10.08 the Harrow Times reported on the company's application for a renewal of licence. *Sergeant Carl Davis, of Harrow Police, wrote in his submission to the licensing panel: 'This premises has a consistent problem with crime and disorder. I request that the premises licence is suspended until proper measures are in place.'*

*On 23.10.08, in the same paper updated the story. The venue, run for the past six years by Yorkshire-based Leisure Connection, was hauled before the licensing panel after police had to be called to a string of incidents. Between August 2006 and August 2007, police had to investigate 54 crimes around Harrow Leisure Centre and Byron Hall, which are in Christchurch Avenue, including burglary, robbery, bomb hoaxes, fraud and indecent assault. A Navratri and Diwali celebration descended into chaos last year as Byron Hall staff struggled to cope with the number of people who wanted to attend, leading to aggressive behaviour and police having to deal with crowd control. In August this year, cops had to go to the entertainment venue twice, first when staff had to close early and drunk people were trying to get back in, and on August 29 when the takings of the bar were stolen during a break-in.*

*The three-man panel of councillors, which sat at the hearing on Monday, imposed strict new conditions on Leisure Connection's licence, including one security guard*

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*on duty for every 100 people, more CCTV cameras around the site and drinks to be sold in plastic glasses. There are also various new measure to combat noise coming from Byron Hall, which has been a problem for local residents...*

*The Harrow Times continued the story on 26.11.08. Police had to shut down one of the largest entertainment venue in Harrow amid fears the management had lost control. Cops were forced to step in after fights started to break out at a Tamil youth night, with officers believing the managers of Byron Hall had not done enough to calm simmering tensions between rival gangs. They issued a closure notice to Leisure Connection, the company responsible for running the venue... after a fight involving up to 50 young people broke out inside the hall during the event. The company now faces a licence review, its second in the space of six weeks, as police continue to hold deep seated fears the management of the venue are not doing enough to combat crime.*

*“Superintendent Matt Gardner, of Harrow Police, backed his officers' decision, and supported Sergeant Davis' assertions Leisure Connection is not doing enough to prevent trouble. He said: ‘We feel that we could have had better cooperation with the leisure centre during this time. It would appear they are not doing enough. My officers spoke with the licensees and they didn't act quickly enough. If we were not there, there could have been serious problems.’*

*In the same paper on 1.12.08 Councillor Phillip O'Dell, remained concerned about ‘a hotbed of crime and disorder’. He said: ‘You have got to look at the effect of what happens outside. The council can impose all these conditions, but ultimately the car park has got to be supervised. There doesn't seem to be any control on what goes on in the car park, and are Leisure Connection going to take responsibility and do something about it?’*

### **OFSTED Reports**

Trawls of OFSTED Reports relating to facilities for children at centres managed by LC has identified many issues. The child-care facilities are not always run directly by LC. As will be seen below, LC sometimes uses sub-contractors. However given the importance of children's welfare, the main contractor must take some of the responsibility.

Some centres appear to be slow to improve even after issues are pointed out. As similar issues appear in a number of Centres, the capacity to share learning across different centres managed by LC/Harpers is questionable.

Carnival Pool Crèche in Wokingham visited on 5.1.10 led to the following imposed actions:

- Ensure children receiving childcare are kept safe from harm and implement effective systems to ensure any person caring for, or in regular contact with children is suitable to work with children; this must include obtaining an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check (Suitability of persons to care for, or be in regular contact with, children).

Ponteland Toddleduck Crèche at Ponteland Leisure Centre near Newcastle upon Tyne visited on 16.4.10

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

- Ensure that at least one person is working at the setting that has successfully completed a qualification at a minimum of level 2 in an area of work relevant to the childcare (Qualifications and training)
- Ensure that all children's behaviour is managed in a suitable manner that it does not have a negative effect on other children (How the childcare provision is organised)
- Keep and implement a written statement for the procedures to be followed for the protection of children, intended to safeguard the children being cared for from abuse or neglect (Arrangements for Safeguarding Children)
- Implement a written statement of the procedures to be followed in relation to complaints which relate to the requirements of the Childcare Register and which a parent makes in writing or by email
- Ensure that parents have copies of the written statements of safeguarding procedures and complaints procedures (Providing information to parents)

Parklands Fit for Sport Kids Camp at Parklands Leisure Centre, Oadby inspected on 29.7.09

- Demonstrate that at least one person at the setting has successfully completed a qualification at a minimum of level 2 in an area of work relevant to the childcare, or training in the core skills as set out in the document 'common core of skills and knowledge of children's workforce' (Qualifications and training).
- Ensure the registered person informs Ofsted of any changes of circumstance (Providing information to Ofsted)
- Ensure relevant information regarding every person working on the premises on which childcare is provided is available for inspection (Records to be kept)

Westminster Lodge Crèche, Westminster Lodge, St. Albans inspected on 7.10.09

- The registered person must ensure that at least one person who is caring for children has an appropriate first aid qualification, with particular regard to staff working within the crèche (Welfare of the children being cared for)
- Keep and implement a written statement of procedures to be followed for the protection of children, intended to safeguard the children being cared for from abuse or neglect, with particular regard to clear reporting procedures in line with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and those to follow in the event of an allegation against a member of staff (Arrangements for safeguarding children)
- The registered person must have effective systems to ensure that the registered person and any person caring for, or in regular contact with children is suitable to work with children and is physically and mentally fit for the work, with particular regard to ongoing suitability (Suitability to care for children, or have regular contact)
- The registered person must have a written statement of procedures to be followed in relation to complaints which relate to the requirements of the Childcare Register (Procedures for dealing with complaints)
- The registered person must make the following information available to parents: information about the registration system for the voluntary part of the Childcare Register and Ofsted's address (Providing information to parents)
- The registered person must inform Ofsted of changes of circumstances as soon as they can (no later than 14 days after the change occurs), with particular regard to current registered individuals and nominated persons for the setting (Providing information to Ofsted)

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

Westminster Lodge Crèche, Westminster Lodge, St. Albans inspected on 4.6.10.

- Have effective systems to ensure that the registered person and any person caring for, or in regular contact with children has skills and experience suitable for the work, with particular regard to an awareness of the requirements of the voluntary part of the Childcare Register (Suitability to care for children, or have regular contact)
- Ensure the registered person informs Ofsted of changes of circumstance as soon as they can (no later than 14 days after the change occurs) with particular regard to the list of current individuals associated with the setting (Changes to premises and provision).

Mountfitchet Romeera Leisure Centre, Stansted inspected on 26.5.10

- Ensure the registered person informs Ofsted of changes of circumstance as soon as they can (no later than 14 days after the change occurs) (Providing information to Ofsted)
- Ensure the registered person informs Ofsted of any change to their name, address or telephone number this refers in particular to the change of manager in sole charge of the children and the change of those responsible under the registered person's criteria (Changes to people).

Dunmow Fit for Sport Kids Camp at Great Dunmow Leisure Centre inspected 19.8.08. Run for 3 to 8 year olds.

Numerous issues – see [full report](#) – including:

- The organisation is inadequate.
- “The quality and standards of the care are inadequate - enforcement action. The registered person does not meet the National Standards for under 8s day care and childminding.”
- During the inspection, two acting managers were running the provision. Neither member of staff holds appropriate qualifications for the post nor is there a named deputy with an appropriate qualification who is able to take charge in the absence of the manager. Lack of training and experience has a negative impact on the provision's ability to meet children's individual needs effectively.
- No evidence could be located regarding criminal record bureau checks. Records, policies and procedures required for the safe and efficient management of the provision and to promote the welfare, care and learning of children are not fully implemented in practice or regularly updated to meet changes in legislation.
- The management of care does not effectively take account of the overall safety, welfare and development of children. At times, there are insufficient staffing levels to ensure that children are supervised safely. In addition to this, daily registers do not include children's hours of attendance to ensure that they can be safely accounted for at all times.
- There is no child-height furniture available for the children. They are unable to join in craft activities comfortably.
- At lunch times, children duly wash their hands so they are nice and clean and ready to eat, then, as there is no furniture, they sit on the dusty, dirty floor to eat and drink.
- Child-accessible storage is inadequate and badly organised, with heavy items stored on upper shelves. During the inspection children accessed a walk-in storage cupboard unchallenged, which contains units with collapsed shelving and

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sweeping brushes with the sweeping contents still in-situ on the floor. The storage of the lunch boxes creates a potential tripping hazard for children as they run and skate around the sports hall.

- Members of staff have not completed relevant first aid training in order to protect children in the event of an accident or emergency situation.
- No clear systems in place to promote good hygiene practice, in particular the cleanliness of the sports hall floor and areas where children sit to eat their snack or lunch. In addition, whilst the setting's policy states that packed lunches are refrigerated as necessary, this is not implemented in practice to protect children from high risk foods, such as meat and egg products. The policy also states that staff have completed food hygiene training, however, during this inspection no members of staff had completed this training and there were no systems in place to check that lunch boxes had cool packs added.
- Children bring water bottles from home. However, once they have drunk this, they do not always have access to fresh drinking water. This is because fresh water is only available in the dance studio on the first floor. As a result, children are either left thirsty or staff ratios are not maintained whilst one member of staff goes to fill up the water bottles.
- Due to lack of staffing on some days, swimming is cancelled, much to the disappointment of the children. There are no facilities enabling children to rest or join in quieter activities, if children do not want to join in a particular game or need to rest if they are tired, the only facilities are two wooden benches.
- There are adequate public toilet facilities for the children to use. However, due to limited staffing, children are allowed to access these independently without members of staff always checking first that it is safe for them to do so, in order to protect them from harm.
- 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".

Dunmow Fit for Sport Kids Camp at Great Dunmow Leisure Centre inspected 23.12.08. See [full letter](#), but includes:

- Having considered all the evidence, the inspector is of the opinion that at this time the setting is making inadequate improvement overall.
- The manager does not have a secure knowledge of all aspects of the setting's safeguarding procedures. Although the manager is aware to report concerns regarding a child, she is unaware that the policy details that it is the manager's responsibility to make a referral. Not all staff members are aware of the requirements of the safeguarding policy or how to implement it. As a result, children are not fully protected.
- The rear door to the building has been secured to prevent unauthorised access to the premises and children are not able to leave the premises unsupervised. However, although there are specific designated areas of the premises for the sole use of the provision, these are not used. As a result, children use areas of the premises that are readily accessible to members of the public, including the toilets.

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- The welfare requirement notice to request parental permission for any necessary emergency medical advice or treatment to promote children's wellbeing in the event of an accident has not been met.
- Evidence has not been made available to demonstrate that the staff members are vetted. For example, there are no Criminal Record Bureau disclosures for any of the staff present. In addition there is no evidence that staff members are suitably qualified or that all supervisors hold a full and relevant level 3 qualification. An interview under caution has been arranged to discuss the reasons for failure to meet the welfare requirements. This interview will inform any further action that Ofsted may wish to take.

Stoke Mandeville Fit For Sport Kids Camp at Stoke Mandeville Stadium inspected 31.8.08. There were 30 children attending, of whom 15 were in the early year's age group. [Full report](#) includes:

- The programme of activities is at times unsuitable for children in the early year's age group. The staff's lack of understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework results in a poorly planned environment. Failure to meet several of the requirements for registration puts children's welfare at risk and there are no systems to support the assessment of their learning and development. As a result, staff fail to complement individual children's learning across the framework and at times some younger children are not fully included and become disengaged.
- Managers are ineffective in organising the staff to care for and safeguard children. There was not a suitably qualified 'person in charge' on site and at times, children are left in the sole charge of a student. This is a breach of the requirements for registration.
- The required records relating to children's care are in place but those relating to staff do not clearly demonstrate that staff are vetted, which is a breach of the requirements for registration.
- Staff have a general understanding of the setting's policies and procedures but those arriving from other settings to act as bank cover lack familiarity with key procedures, such as those for evacuation. This diminishes their ability to keep children safe. Staff have not implemented the setting's risk assessment procedures, which results in hazards to children within the premises.
- The learning environment does not ensure all children are engaged and included in purposeful play.
- At times poor organisation results in the cancellation of activities such as swimming at short notice, which causes disappointment to children. Plans do not address the differing needs of younger children or those who do not wish to participate in planned games, for example, children who do not wish to take part in badminton or aerobic exercise. Overall, the lack of planning results in periods of boredom and disengagement for younger children, who find the activities are often not appropriately differentiated.
- Staff plan for and teach children to be safe when moving around the sports centre and crossing the car park but are not vigilant in checking for hazards and consequently miss some potential risks to children's safety. Children take part in practising emergency drills but not all staff are familiar with these procedures, which put children's welfare at risk. Parents spoken with say their children enjoy coming to the setting. They have access to the setting's policies and procedures, and notices that provide general day-to-day information, such as the children's activities, the names of the staff on site and nominated first aiders, but these are not always up-to-date.

## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

Harrow September 2009 - OFSTED inspected Harrow Leisure Centre Crèche on 4.9.09 and found it non-compliant. A letter said, "The inspector found that you were not meeting all of the Requirements for the Childcare Register. The inspector discussed the reason(s) for this during the visit. ... The following actions are to be completed ... provide parents with copies of the written statements of safeguarding procedures and complaints procedures.."

Fit for Sport, Bisham Abbey February 2009

*On 27/7/08 LC/Harpers announced Leisure Connection has teamed up with Fit for Sport to provide Ofsted registered holiday programmes for children across nine Leisure Connection sites. Children will be introduced to a variety of fitness activities and nutritional information in an environment of peers that allow them to build their self confidence, develop team-work skills, improve their fitness levels and in many cases, help them to lose weight. Children will also be taught valuable life skills to take outside of the club which can help children to sustain and build on their achievements.*

*Victoria Branch, Leisure Connection's marketing manager said: 'We are working with Fit for Sport because they are one of the most reputable holiday programme operators in the UK and have been doing fantastic work in improving the fitness levels of children for over 10 years. Last year through the Fitter Schools Challenge Fit for Sport increased children's activity by 14%, something we're keen to build upon and support the ethos of getting more people, more active, more often. Through working with Fit for Sport we can help children get into the habit of taking regular exercise both inside and outside of school and help them to lead a healthier lifestyle.'*

However, when Ofsted inspected Fit for Sport at Bisham Abbey in Marlow, a centre owned by the Sports Council and managed by LC/Harpers they were not so happy. They marked nine out of twelve categories as "inadequate" and the other three as satisfactory. Findings included:

"There are currently two permanent staff working in the setting; neither holds a suitable childcare qualification, although one holds sports coaching qualifications."

"Overall the quality of the provision is inadequate. Allocated rooms are not always available to the setting to promote continuity to the children and staff have to rearrange planned activities to accommodate these changes. Details of staff's vetting status are not available on site to ascertain their suitability to work with children, and staffing levels are not always maintained. A self-evaluation system is in place but has not been completed; however, staff do ask the children for feedback and evaluation about planned activities and re-plan popular ones. There is no key person system in place to help staff become familiar with children's individual needs. Overall, the early year's provision requires significant improvement."

"The setting does not carry out written risk assessments and the base room is not always available for sole use during operational hours, therefore children do not have a place to store their belongings. Areas used by the children change frequently and staff do not always have opportunities to visually check these areas to ascertain if these are safe before children use them. Ratios are not maintained at all times."

"Contingency plans are in place to cover staff absences, although agency staff do not always have an induction about the setting's policies, procedures and areas they use and do not always arrive at the beginning of the session. There are no opportunities

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for staff to take breaks away from the children during operational hours. The regulator are not always informed of changes to the premises where childcare is provided that may affect the space available to children and staff do not always identify potential hazards to minimise possible risks."

"Staff caring for children have little knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage and therefore do not effectively promote this, nor plan for individual developmental stages and interests. There is no evidence of staff's first aid training on site."

Fit for Sport Kids' Camp Stoke Mandeville 31.10.08

[http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare\\_reports/download/\(id\)/226907/\(as\)/EY347895\\_INS P.pdf](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare_reports/download/(id)/226907/(as)/EY347895_INS P.pdf)

Another worrying low set of scores resulting in the summary conclusion, "Overall, the early year's provision requires significant improvement."

Other quotes include:

"Fit For Sport Kids Camp was registered in 2007. It is owned by Fit for Sport Limited and operates from the Stoke Mandeville Sports Stadium and Lodge in partnership with Leisure Connect."

"Managers are ineffective in organising the staff to care for and safeguard children. There was not a suitably qualified 'person in charge' on site and at times, children are left in the sole charge of a student. This is a breach of the requirements for registration."

"The required records relating to children's care are in place but those relating to staff do not clearly demonstrate that staff are vetted, which is a breach of the requirements for registration."

"Staff have a general understanding of the setting's policies and procedures but those arriving from other settings to act as bank cover lack familiarity with key procedures, such as those for evacuation. This diminishes their ability to keep children safe. Staff have not implemented the setting's risk assessment procedures, which results in hazards to children within the premises. However, staff are vigilant in teaching children to be safe when moving around the sports centre. There are also appropriate safety systems in place to support activities such as swimming."

"The programme of activities is strongly linked to sports and fitness but it does not give sufficient attention to helping children make progress within the EYFS. The learning environment does not ensure all children are engaged and included in purposeful play. The setting's work with parents is generally sound and, as a result, they are pleased with the setting. However, there are no systems for working in partnership with other carers and professionals."

"Children have little opportunity for meaningful activity in the period before the programme of planned activities commences. Planning for children within the early year's age group does not give sufficient attention to helping them make progress within the EYFS, as it primarily focuses on their physical development. Overall, staff do not know children's starting points and there are no evaluation and assessment systems. Consequently, there is no method of ascertaining children's overall progress."

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"At times poor organisation results in the cancellation of activities such as swimming at short notice, which causes disappointment to children. Plans do not address the differing needs of younger children or those who do not wish to participate in planned games, for example, children who do not wish to take part in badminton or aerobic exercise. Overall, the lack of planning results in periods of boredom and disengagement for younger children, who find the activities are often not appropriately differentiated."

"Staff plan for and teach children to be safe when moving around the sports centre and crossing the car park but are not vigilant in checking for hazards and consequently miss some potential risks to children's safety. Children take part in practising emergency drills but not all staff are familiar with these procedures, which put children's welfare at risk. Parents spoken with say their children enjoy coming to the setting. They have access to the setting's policies and procedures, and notices that provide general day-to-day information, such as the children's activities, the names of the staff on site and nominated first aiders, but these are not always up-to-date."

### **Company Issues**

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Danoptra, formerly Kunick, a company with interests in gaming machines owns Leisure Connection. In June 2008 Credit Suisse led a deal to acquire Danoptra from the venture capital company, Cognetas, formerly known as Electra.

Intergame reported on 25.1.07 that Danoptra had filed its accounts for the financial year ended September 30, 2005.

*Danoptra earnings before interest and tax was £10.7m (2004: £11.8m) on sales up to £201.9m from £191.5m in 2004. A large non-cash charge of £61.4m for goodwill impairment plus other non-cash and exceptional items produced a loss after tax of £82m. The company said that the trading environment remained difficult in 2006 and the group is in talks with its finance providers.*

Following the news of this write-off there was increased speculation that LC would be sold off and on 15.7.07 The Mail On Sunday reported LC was for sale "at up to £50 million" with Danoptra appointing PricewaterhouseCoopers to handle the sale.

These events overlap to some extent with the departure of Danoptra's Chief Executive, Colin Daniels, in May 2007 to "retire" at the age of 55.

Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness has had five changes of command in the last decade. In 2000 Paul Campbell resigned and Russell Smith, Chief Executive of what became Danoptra, took an active role along with Nigel Golding as Managing Director of Leisure Connection until Glynn Mellor took over as Chief Executive. Graham Farrant became CE in 2004. In January 2009 PMP Leisure Consultancy announced that Farrant would become their new boss. (Farrant was at the helm when PMP crashed and is now CE of Thurrock Council.) Farrant was replaced at LC by Richard Millman.

What is clear is that the number of LC municipal contracts has dwindled. From dominating the market, it has become a much smaller player. For example, in London it has lost contracts with Ealing, Hackney, Lambeth, the Lee Valley Authority and Harrow. The only two councils that remain, Brent and Lewisham, are both tied to LC through long term PFI centres. In 2004 LC lost its contract with Sport England for

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Crystal Palace to Greenwich Leisure. Since 2004, Greenwich Leisure, a not for profit organisation has grown rapidly and now has far more municipal contracts than LC.

Admittedly, a not-for-profit organisation in the leisure sector has some financial advantages, but it seems that other major private leisure operators have done better than LC in the last five years. (Unfortunately the Leisure Manager Contractors Association, which once published lists of its members' clients appears to be defunct.) The conclusion I draw is that LC has squandered its reputation and goodwill through pushing for short-term profits.

Before the Internet and search engines and FOI, companies operating across the country had more chance of hiding their bad news or at least keeping it local. If LCW had proved one thing it is that damage limitation is much harder in the age of the Internet. Hoping that one happens in one town or city is not known about elsewhere is now a much riskier strategy. In 2003, I found on the web with little effort six unfavourable reports about LC from six different centres. These reports convinced me that there would be more if I kept digging. How many more have emerged has surprised me.

In the last few years LC has been dropping Leisure Connection from signs, uniforms and the like and replacing with the brand with Harpers Fitness. I have likened this to changing the name of Windscale to Sellafield. Relatively few people will be fooled and already the Harpers brand has been contaminated by further reports of poor standards since the change started.

### **About the Author**

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I am a resident of Brent who 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 a self-employed organisation development consultant.

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 / Harpers Fitness 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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## Leisure Connection / Harpers Fitness Dossier - What are the Issues?

### Document History

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Issue 1 ~ 8.2.06

Issue 2 ~ 18.2.06 – proofreading changes made and further material on Great Yarmouth added

Issue 3 ~ 5.7.06 - Hackney Contract entry amended. Reference to Harrow H&S report included.

Issue 4 ~ 18.11.06 - Further references to lifeguarding issues, maintenance problems, updates on cleaning, and news of staff cuts were added.

Issue 5 ~ 8.10.07 - Company Issues section added and updates to several other sections.

Issue 6 ~ 24.12.08 – Social Disturbance issues added and updates to several other sections.

Issue 7 ~ 6.5.11 – OFSTED Reports section added. URL's updated or links no longer working identified. Updates to several other sections.