



# **The Investing in Children Leisure Research Report**

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## The Investing In Children Leisure Group

Through Investing in Children we (Rachel Lee, Stacey Lee and Samantha Jackson) had worked on a project called Operation Discrimination which looked at the treatment young people received when they tried to use different services in County Durham. A major issue for young people we talked to was access to leisure centres and the way we are excluded at certain times of the day. We knew that other young people had experienced this so we joined forces with a group of young people from Ferryhill to find out what we could do about it. We then decided to work with another group from outside Investing In Children and held several meetings with the Durham Children and Young People's Council who had also carried out some research.

We decided to establish what was already happening in Durham by visiting the local leisure centres and talking to the managers about issues important to us. We split into two groups. We decided that 2 – 3 people from the same area would contact their local leisure centres to arrange interviews with the managers.

We visited and spoke managers and staff at the following centres

Leisure Centre in Ushaw Moor  
The Spectrum in Willington  
Glenholme in Crook  
Meadowfield Sports Centre  
Spennymoor Leisure Centre  
Woodhouse Close Leisure Centre in Bishop Auckland  
The Dolphin Centre in Darlington  
Ferryhill Leisure Centre  
Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre.

We also dropped in unannounced at Peterlee, Sherburn and The Abbey Sports Centres to test out how accessible they are.

Our intention was to visit several centres and ask a series of questions based around what we knew already as young people and what others had told us.

The issues we wished to discuss with the managers were:

- **Cost** – the entrance fee and activity costs in many leisure centres because they are placed beyond the pocket of many young people – social justice.
- **Access - times when young people are allowed in** – examples were given when young people were “kicked out” after 5.30 p.m. It was noticed that, in the evenings, adults could spectate but young people couldn't.

- **Swimming pools** – rules are often unreasonably strict. Many pools for schools are under used.
- **Attitude of leisure centre staff** – can be miserable - treat young people badly – differently from adults.
- **Bus fares** – together with entrance fees, they can make leisure centres beyond the pocket of some young people – services only for the better off – it's not fair.
- **Adults** – seem to need access in child/young person free zones – is this intolerance? Rules should be made clear.
- **Pass system** – this would be fairer than banning all young people because of the behaviour of a few.
- These issues were very important to us and we felt there needed to be some changes in leisure for young people.

### **Spectrum Leisure Complex** in Willington - Manager, N. Philipson

We were introduced to Mr. Philipson and he asked if we would like a tour round the centre to see the facilities and which activities took place where. We found that they provided a large range of activities including badminton and tennis to a function and social suite for hire. They provide a large range of activities that seem to suit a range of social groups including young people.

We found that a junior rate was under 16, before 5pm and on a weekend. We decided that the weekday times were no good as young people don't finish school until 3.30pm so they then only have one and a half hours before the rate finishes. We asked who set these rules and if individual leisure centres had any control over the rules. The answer we received was no, they have no control over them as they are set by the council authority in this case being Wear Valley District Council.

The Spectrum Leisure Complex runs a Saturday night roller disco which was very popular at first but the attendance has now gone down as Mr. Philipson believes that most people aged 14 – 16 are out, in pubs drinking rather than using the facilities. The roller discos are split into two sessions, under 12's and over 12's this was for safety reasons. It also closes in the summer holidays due to people going on holiday.

Mr. Philipson said that he felt the activities were cheap but that travelling to and from the leisure centre was expensive.

The centre attracts schools and colleges from out of the area for £3.50 a day to do any activity but local schools chose not to use the centres facilities. Mr. Philipson commented that boys are easier to cater for than girls are.

We asked Mr. Philipson about the bar facilities and he said that you had to be 18 to use the bar but they would sometimes let over 16's in to use the pool tables providing they were well behaved.

If you are doing an activity you can sit, watch, chat and drink and the staff would treat you exactly as they would an adult. If you are not taking part in an activity you can be charged 30 – 60 pence to spectate. If you then start to misbehave you are escorted off the premises. Bans can be enforced for 1 – 6 months but to do this you need the name and address in order to inform the parents.

The centre previously has held discos but these were stopped due to people coming in drunk and causing fights. He also knew the tricks of when people used to buy tickets and pass them along to people behind them in the queue so they could all get in.

Mr. Philipson said that these are our facilities because our parents pay the council tax that pays for places like this to be open.

'Rules are dictated by Health and Safety' and this is why age ranges for different activities vary. Play schemes and day trips mean children must be over 8 due to the Child Protection Act.

Mr. Philipson explained that he would be interested in a scheme like the one in Barnard Castle but found it would create problems with staff.

Mr. Philipson found that the staff treats young people badly because of their behaviour in the past - 'branded with the same iron'. He agreed this was not fair but it is the way the world works.

There are two parts to the Spectrum Leisure Complex – arrivals 1 and 2 which both require receptions. In both of these buildings there are numerous suggestion boxes in which complaints can be received. The problems we found with these boxes were that they were situated opposite the reception and the reception staff tend to stare if you approach them.

Overall we found Mr. Philipson to be polite, co-operative and interested in what we had to say although at times we felt he was just saying it to please us.

## **Glenholme Leisure Complex in Crook – Manager, Mr. Roney**

We were introduced to Mr. Roney and sat in the cafeteria area to discuss and ask questions about the leisure centre.

We asked him what he felt about our experiences of being treated differently from adults.

Mr. Roney's views on this were – everyone should be treated the same providing they obeyed the rules. He also said that *'sometimes you get young people who come in and mess around'*. *The young people who do this get other young people a bad name, but most abide by the rules.*

If young people do misbehave there can be a ban depending on how bad or serious this is, the ban could range from 1-6 months. Before the staff could ban someone they need to take their name and address to write to their parents telling them how long they are banned for and why. Most of the time if young people are messing around a verbal warning is given. If it continues they will be put out for one day – one week. Sometimes behaviour of some people can be really bad and the staff have to get the police involved even though they try not to.

We also asked Mr. Roney if there was a wide range of activities. Mr. Roney thought swimming was the main attraction as there was no big main sports hall. There were a lot of activities to do in the swimming from - 50 plus sessions to kiddies club. Glenholme also had sun-beds, sauna, spa pool and rest room, fitness room and a crèche. Other sports like football etc can be played outside providing the weather is fine. Sports played outside the leisure centre tend to be cheaper and are therefore attractive to young people. If you are a part of the swimming classes you get free passes in the school holidays.

Every Saturday they run an afternoon club, which costs £1.00. You can do any activity you want. If the weather is fine some activities are set up outside. Sometimes they have activity days, which are free and mainly for young people under 10 years old. For the leisure centre to hold a big activity day they need to bring in more staff to cover it.

The cafeteria is run privately and young people are allowed in to use the café and toilets. This is good, as most centres will not allow young people to use the café or machines and toilets. Mr. Roney is trying to set up an exchange with the Spectrum and Glenholme so that a group from each place could do a swap for a day to try out different activities. The bus fare would be paid for, so no one would have to worry about the cost of bus fare, as this is very expensive. Mr. Roney thinks this is a major problem for people from different areas and is why people don't travel to leisure centres out of their own area.

We found out that the age groups were the same as the Spectrum as they were both run by Wear Valley Council. The only thing that was different was the swimming age rules which were -

- Under 8's must be supervised by adults
- 2 children per adult

There are a lot of other rules for swimming -

- No pushing
- No bombing
- No running
- No ducking
- No shouting
- No swimming under diving boards
- No practicing acrobatics or gymnastics
- No diving under 1.5 metres
- No smoking
- No petting
- No back diving
- No spitting
- No throwing objects
- And children in nappies must wear appropriate bathing costume
- Young people who are spectating or unaccompanied have to be out by 7.00pm

Most of these rules are common sense but some are unfair to young people.

Mr. Roney was very helpful and seemed to be very interested in young people's views. He also let us look around the facilities, which was very useful as we could see how the centre was set out.

### **Deerness Valley Leisure Centre** in Ushaw Moor, Manager - E. Tobin

We met with the manager Mr. Tobin and found him very polite. We asked him a series of questions and this was his response.

He stated that young people are not allowed into the centre unless they are taking part in an activity. They do not like young people just walking around the centre. A young person is anyone under 16 years.

Young people are allowed in one at a time to use the machines, drinks sweets etc. Young people can be barred from the centre depending on what happened and how serious the offence. If a young person wanted to make a complaint they

have to send in a letter or complete a form which may then be sent to the council office at Claypath to be dealt with.

Young people are not allowed to use the weights room or the cardio room, although young people aged between 14 and 16 may be permitted if they have an adult with them. Durham City Council sets these rules.

The centre has a multi-sensory room, which is used by disabled people, as it is very relaxing and stimulating.

The centre has junior rates which apply to under 16s, but there are no concessions for older teenagers even if they are in full time education or unemployed.

Mr. Tobin thinks that overall the prices are fair, as you would be charged double at a private centre. He admitted that young people are not treated the same as adults but this is because of past behavior. When asked about activities that might encourage younger people to use the centre like discos or roller blading he said that they cost too much to run. He also said the Leisure Centre maybe going private and turning into a gymnastics club\*

*\* Since our visit we have heard it is to close and reopen as a private sports club.*

### **Meadowfield Leisure Complex** in Meadowfield – Manager, B.Burn

We met with Mr. Burn and he talked about what facilities are on offer to the public.

He felt that young people aged 13-16 are difficult to cater for, as they tend to want things that the centre can not provide. The centre does run a disco once a month for under 18s, which is supported by the police.

Mr. Burn did not believe that excluding young people was fair as this was a public building and open to everyone. Although there are no spectating areas young people are allowed in the centre from 9.00am until 10.00pm. They are free to use the machines and the toilets. Young people over the age of 14 can also use the fitness room if they are part of a class and can be safely supervised.

At the time of the interview Mr. Burn was concerned about staff cuts and people losing their jobs. He thought customer care was very important and did not want the centre to suffer cuts. The centre has 9 full time staff and 8 part time staff. After the interview we were taken on a guided tour. All the staff we met were very friendly. Overall we liked Mr. Burn. He seemed to understand what it was like to be young and talked about the things he used to do when he was our age.

To us, Meadowfield Leisure Complex seemed very open and accessible to everyone, including young people

### **Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre** in Newton Aycliffe

Before we start this report we would like to say that the manager was very unwelcoming. His first comments were "This isn't going to take long is it, I've got a headache and I'm due off duty in ten minutes" as if he was saying that this was all the time we had and he really did not want to be there with us. The interview was also conducted in the main reception hall in the building with lots of background noise, which made it very distracting for him and difficult for us.

The manager said that young people (children as he called them) are treated the same as adults when they are in the centre. A young person is anyone under the age of 18 when paying entrance to the centre but under 16 when using the fitness suite, which is an adult only area.

If young people are not doing an activity or with an adult there is an 8pm curfew which is extended to 9pm in the summer depending on the behaviour and the problems that the centre has. The centre provides a Youth Drop-In which is an Internet Café called the Coffee Bean, a Junior Drop-In, a gymnastics club, football clubs etc, which are all for young people to use at their leisure. Being a member of a club is encouraged and works out cheaper than casual use. The Manager said young people are also allowed in to use the vending machines and go to the toilets providing they are 'well behaved'.

Access is quite awkward for those that are disabled as it is on 3 levels and they have to use lifts. Otherwise it is easy to get to as it is in the middle of town near a shopping centre.

The manager said that in his opinion the prices were quite reasonable compared to some centres.

Some activities have age limits for example, for the sauna girls must be over 14 and boys must be over 16. To use the gym you must be over 14 but can only use the C.V equipment. Once 16 you can use the weights but these rules are set by national guidelines.

The centre has a large pool of staff. On average they have 40 per week then a number of others that come in when they are needed. Pricing policies are set by the council and they have no control over them.

## **Spennymoor Leisure Complex** in Spennymoor

We met with a member of the Leisure complex staff who showed us around the building. The centre offers a range of activities for all ages from toddlers to the over 60s

A young person is anyone under the age of 18. If you are part of a youth group within the area of Sedgefield Borough Council you can use the facilities at the reduced rate. At certain times if you pay for one activity you can choose another one for free. Young people not taking part in an activity or not accompanied by an adult are asked to leave at 8.00pm.

We learned that some young people had been banned from the centre for good and would not be allowed back in. This only happens if the offence is serious and the police are involved. Other bans vary in length but can last a few weeks.

Despite this, the policy is that staff treat everyone with respect regardless of age and trained youth workers support the staff with the 13-16 age group. Young people are allowed into the centre to use toilets and vending machines even if they are not taking part in an activity.

While we were in the centre we observed a lot of young people either using facilities or just hanging around. It seemed to be fairly open and accessible to all.

## **Woodhouse Close Leisure Complex** in Bishop Auckland

When we arrived at Woodhouse Close the manager met and asked us how far we had traveled. When we said about 20 minutes he said he didn't want to send us back as we had come by bus and it was 20 minutes away. The reason was they were having problems with staff. The manager asked us if we were able to wait about 30 minutes until he got the staff sorted out. We asked if we could wait by the pool - side and he said yes. About 10 minutes later the manager came back and said the problem was sorted so we went into his office to ask our questions.

We asked him about what he thought of young people being treated differently from adults. He said everyone is treated the same because at the end of the day everyone is a paying customer. We talked about the prices but he thought the prices were reasonable and meetings were being held about people with disabilities being able to pay reduced rates as well as underprivileged children.

He did agree that some people might not be able to come and use the centre, especially those people who lived outside the area who had to pay to get to Bishop Auckland. The only thing the leisure centre could do was to reduce the

price but if they did, the prices of the other leisure centres would have to do the same. There is a junior rate as the centre is run by Wear Valley District Council.

We talked about the access to leisure centre. The manager said he thinks the main entrance should be on the same side of the building as the car park. He thought the access into the building was ok for the disabled but there is no lift so they can't get up stairs. He also said at the end of the day if a lift had to be put in then they would have to do it and get the money from somewhere and agreed that the front doors were heavy.

At the leisure centre there was a wide range of activities like swimming, sauna, spa pool, sun beds, squash, creche, soft play room, kiddies club, exercise classes, CV suit and weights. There were more exercise classes but these were done in the swimming pool. The swimming pool also had a flume, which is very popular with the young people. There are a lot of rules for the swimming pool, which are the same as Glenholme. People over 16 are only allowed in the weights room and these are national rules set by health and safety. Junior spectators are not allowed in after 7.00pm this rule was made years ago but the centre does not take any notice of this. On a lunchtime the young people are allowed in to use the café, toilets and machines.

We talked about the club at Barnard Castle leisure centre and he said Woodhouse had nothing like that but do have a splash session for people under 16 years. To be a part of the splash session you have to pay 75p.

The manager seemed very nice and interested to talk to us. He seemed very interested to listen to our views and we were interested to listen to his views. After we talked to him we went on a tour of the leisure centre. The centre seemed big with lots to do but not many activities for young people.

### **The Dolphin Centre** in Darlington

We talked to the manager about the treatment young people receive from staff in some leisure centres.

He said he does not have a policy but expects his staff to treat young people fairly. He thought that young people get the treatment they deserve, in other words, if they treat the staff with respect then the staff will treat them with respect. He says any young person who walks straight past the receptionist may be treated as someone about to vandalise the centre and may be asked to leave.

While we were there, some young people were coming in and out of the centre to use the toilets and machines and there was nobody stopping them. We tried to walk straight past and we were not challenged.

The manager said he does not like to bar any young person but told us of a young lad who was screaming at staff that he wanted his money back. When the lad started swearing he was kicked out but allowed back in later in the day after he apologised.

The Dolphin Centre allows young people to come in and spectate up until 10.00pm. The staff claim there has recently been a lot of vandalism by young people and there may be changes in the way reception is laid out to stop some young people coming in.

The activities are mainly aimed at adults although young people over 12 can use the fitness room. You have to be 14+ and supervised to use the weights. You can use the sauna room unsupervised if you are over 16. Other activities include football, hockey, roller skating and swimming which is fairly priced at £1.20 for a child and £2.00 adult.

The manager said he is very keen to see more young people using the centre.

### **Ferryhill Leisure Complex** in Ferryhill

The first thing we have to say about Ferryhill is that we were given a very warm welcome and were invited into a small room based in the bar and where we were offered a soft drink. We were given a tour of the building and had a look around the facilities to see what the activities there were. The activities were mainly football, basketball, netball etc. Also they had squash, sauna, Jacuzzi and an indoor bowling green.

We were asked if we would like to have a go of the indoor bowls. After two goes of this we found it a bit boring. We talked to the manager Mr. Snowball about how young people get involved in decisions. He mentioned that the idea of a bowling green had come out of a questionnaire sent around Ferryhill asking people what they want to see in the centre as they had received a lottery grant to put a new facility in. The centre was going to try and set up a junior bowling club but at that time only one young person was interested in.

We don't believe that any young people could have been consulted as no one we knew would ever choose an indoor bowling green as an activity.

The pricing system seemed about the same as most of the leisure centres we visited. The staff levels seemed to be about the same as well. The staff here also expected to be able to bar young people if they were misbehaving. We found access into the centre was easy but the staff knew we were there for a meeting. While we were there a lot of young people were standing outside and had been asked to leave earlier on.

Mr. Snowball was not aware of the staff treating young people differently from adults and expected everyone to be treated the same.

*The most important thing about Ferryhill was not what happened at the meeting but what happened the next night. Kim, who was in the group who had talked to Mr. Snowball went to the centre with her friends the next night and was told to get out as soon as she set foot in the door and given no reason why. This was totally different from the warm welcome we got at the meeting and proves what the manager was saying about equal treatment wasn't true.*

### **Peterlee Leisure Centre, Sherburn Leisure Centre & Abbey Sports Centre**

First of all we went along to **Peterlee Leisure Centre** to find out how we would be treated if we just walked in and asked to do an activity. The woman on reception who was very polite told us there was nothing apart from swimming and aerobics but we weren't really interested in those two activities so we left. Then we sent an adult in and the same woman told him that a lot more activities were available so we knew we were given false information.

Next we visited **Sherburn Sports Centre**. The man on reception was very friendly but told us the only thing available that night was kick-boxing. When we said we weren't interested he tried to persuade us and even told us to go down the corridor to watch the kick boxing class. We liked the way he tried to get us involved in things even though we had never been there before.

The last leisure centre we visited that night was **Abbey Sports Centre**. This time we decided to just hang around the reception area to see what happened. Nobody bothered us so we went to reception to ask about activities. They were very nice with us but told us there was nothing on until the next day but encouraged us to come back.

Overall we thought we were treated well in all centres although we thought Peterlee were not giving us the full information.

### **What we found out**

#### **How we were received**

We have to say that, except for Newton Aycliffe, we were well received and our questions and concerns seemed to be taken seriously. Kim's experience at Ferryhill could be proof that some managers were just saying the right things because we were seen as important people from Investing In Children. This didn't impress the manager of Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre who couldn't even be bothered to treat us with courtesy.

## **General Rules and Regulations**

Everyone we talked to said the local council set most rules. This is strange, as leisure centres from the same council area seem to have different rules. It could be an easy way to avoid the question.

## **Attitude of staff toward young people – general treatment**

While all the staff we talked to said they believed in treating young people the same as adults, some admitted that young people do not get the same treatment and didn't seem too interested in doing anything about it. Young people 'get branded with the same iron, but it's the way things are' – *Spectrum*.

## **Bans**

Most centres thought it was right to be able to ban young people for up to 6 months. One centre gave out indefinite bans.

## **Activities**

There was a good range of activities in most centres we visited, but most were aimed at adults.

## **Access**

Only Brandon (*no restrictions or bans*) allowed open and free access to young people until 10.00pm. Most had a time in the early evening when young people had to leave or were made to pay just to spectate. The experience of Ferryhill shows that in reality access to leisure centres for young people is not as open as some of these managers claim.

## **Passes**

This research didn't answer all the questions we set out to ask. For example, we didn't find out what each leisure centre thought about a pass system. We think it is time this was discussed.

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