

STRATEGIC LEISURE SERVICES AS 'INTEGRATOR AND BROKER': BEST VALUE AS A STIMULUS TO LOCAL REGENERATION?

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INTRODUCTION

Public sector professionals are urged to use research findings more effectively to provide the 'evidence base' for action (Nutley & Davies, 2000), and also to account for the use of scarce resources. They are also required to consult and collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders, work across organisational boundaries and be ever more creative and innovative in bringing theory and good practice together to instigate change. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the Best Value process, where local authority professionals are expected to *Consult, Compare, Challenge and Compete* (the four 'C' s of Best Value).

Best Value is a key element of the Modernising Local Government Programme, placing a duty on local authorities to seek continuous improvement and ensure that citizens receive high quality, efficient and responsive services. Furthermore, the Local Government Act 2000 required local authorities to prepare Community Strategies for promoting and improving the economic, social and environmental well being of their areas, and to contribute to sustainable development. In particular Local Strategic Partnerships were established to facilitate consultation and involvement (Liddle & Townsend, 2003).

Leisure Services departments within local authorities have long played a central role in achieving overall well-being of locales, but they remain a non-statutory service function. It is one area of local government under less constraint from central government and has the powerful potential to provide co-ordination, support and enabling functions in bringing together disparate services across districts as a whole. Leisure services have never been primarily about economic development, though they can be used to aid economic and social regeneration. It is difficult, however, to prove the added value this service area can offer.

It is within this context that Chief Leisure Officers of Durham City Council began to consider undertaking a strategic analysis of service provision to satisfy Best Value Inspection, and involve communities in helping to develop future service provision. The author was recruited to develop a research methodology to engage stakeholders in the strategy process, and to produce a Leisure Strategy that would form the basis of a Best Value Review of Leisure Services. The article records the main activities carried out over the 18-month period to June

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2003. It is concerned with how knowledge and information was transferred between internal and external stakeholders, in the process of considering strategic options available to a Leisure Service Department.

Three recurring themes underpin the research, (i) the need to reflect on vital process issues; (ii) the importance of linkages, connections, interactions and social networks to engage communities (not just in leisure but in broader regeneration activities); and (iii) the significance of leisure officers as innovative and entrepreneurial public servants. The study took place against a backdrop of changing local, sub-regional and regional governance, and utilises an action research approach.

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Social inclusion and engagement of ‘hard to reach’ communities, joined up partnership action and bending mainstream sources of funding to achieve overall social, economic and environmental aims require a range of innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to service delivery. It is argued here that, over the years, Leisure Services have developed the relevant structures and linkages, as well as developing intrinsic and tacit knowledge on local communities, to facilitate greater engagement and social inclusion.

Leisure services can act as an ‘integrator’ or ‘broker’ to other associated services across a district, thereby helping to achieve corporate objectives. Linkages made beyond the boundaries of a local authority, can also promote joined-up action - of particular significance as local authorities attempt to ‘fit’ their provision into overall sub-regional and regional objectives.

Leisure is the one local authority service area which can justifiably claim to provide the ‘social glue’ that holds together many other activities. Linkages developed over many years allow critical insights needed to improve understanding of the capacities of deprived communities, and how individuals interact and network. Leisure Officers spend most of their working lives in communities and are well placed to undertake a ‘brokerage’ role between communities, local authorities and the myriad of agencies now operating in regeneration.

METHODOLOGY FOR STRATEGY FORMULATION

The research data were collected by Action Research (AR), considered to be the most appropriate method in identifying key issues facing City of Durham Leisure Services. Senior council officers wanted to address some of the failures identified in previous Best Value audits. An in-depth examination of areas of concern was undertaken. Internal and external stakeholders were involved in the process of addressing problem areas, putting new ideas into action and instigating a change process. AR can be a powerful method of inquiry, intervention and evaluation in that it intertwines

action, research and inquiry. It is also a means for professionals and other stakeholders to create an iterative learning opportunity. There are obvious questions about the general validity of unique case material, as well as a recognition that, at every point in the policy process, all key concepts (including policies, strategies, inputs and impacts) are socially constructed and contestable (Hay, 2003: Paton, 2003). However, AR can improve the practice of research by generating know-how about a social system while at the same time facilitating change in that system (Lewin, 1946). Two major objectives of this research were, first, to determine some of the complexities of the surrounding the social and political milieu and, second, to examine some of the internal/external linkages of Leisure Services.

There was a clear understanding from the outset that the author, as a change agent, would assist various stakeholders in identifying areas of concern. It was hoped that using collaboration and group dynamics to identify and solve problems, the research would also help to change professional practices and improve understanding of local authority interactions. A broad range of internal and external stakeholders likely to be affected were drawn together, for the purposes of diagnosing problems and developing remedial measures and plans of action. At heart it was a participative process of planned intervention involving an external facilitator/researcher (the author) in a process which was intended to result in empowerment and the development of alliances, and also to open up channels of communication.

Involving stakeholders in decision-making and regeneration satisfied the need for social inclusion, active participation and balancing rights and responsibilities. It was also hoped that stakeholders would help in the process of reappraising institutional arrangements. It is generally accepted that any future change process requires the management of a series of complex relationships, and the chosen methodology was used to identify, analyse and reflect on the situation and role of marginalised stakeholders (those considered to be disconnected from decision-making).

Developing a strategy via these means was an integral part of an on-going process of change aimed at enabling Leisure Services to enhance the importance of services in the lives of the local community, in a manner consistent with many emerging national, regional and local strategies (Liddle, 2001).

The project drew on existing secondary reports and materials from departments across the council, and also encouraged wide stakeholder discussion involving:

- Strategic and other workshops (with all Heads of Services in the authority)
- Focus groups and in-depth interviews (in six zonal areas)
- City Wide consultation
- Service profiling
- Benchmarking with other local authority Leisure Service departments
- 'Challenge Day' with all staff
- Lifestyle exhibition and school competition

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- ❑ A financial appraisal of leisure services (by external consultants)
- ❑ A 'Creativity Day' with external stakeholders (on shaping future service provision)

CONTEXT FOR STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Local Authorities are typically political and departmentalised entities and the City of Durham was no exception. Surface level harmony often hides deeper-seated professional rivalries and conflicting views on how policies should be formulated and implemented. The City of Durham has an internal Cabinet system, and in the 2003 local elections the Liberal Democrat party took control from the ruling Labour group.

The City Council is one of seven County Durham districts, and, despite the relative affluence of the City, the Council has responsibility for services in a number of impoverished former mining villages. The City Council failed to qualify for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, something which has become a source of tension between neighbouring district authorities (Sedgefield, Easington and Wear Valley - all in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal funding). The City Council has established a Local Strategic Partnership, but without the benefit of NRF, progress is understandably slow.

Relationships between the City Council and Durham County Council have been relatively cordial, but recent developments have altered working arrangements. The White Paper on proposed Regional Assemblies (RA) created county/district tensions. Immediately following the announcement that RAs would only be introduced above a unitary system of government, the County Council wrote to districts informing them that in any future re-organisation the county would constitute the unitary authority beneath the regional level. Moreover, the County Council also conducted a large-scale survey of local households to confirm its view that local people would prefer the county as the unitary authority. The speed at which the County Council acted after the announcement incensed the Chief Executives and leaders of the districts, and prompted them to respond. All districts (including the City) combined forces and resources to commission Institute of Local Government (INLOGOV), at the University of Birmingham, to examine alternative configurations of unitary authorities. The resulting report concluded that combinations of districts beneath the county level would constitute the appropriate government arrangements for effective service delivery (INLOGOV Report, 2003).

The Boundary Commission's Final Report is yet to be published. Thus, it remains to be seen what type of unitary authority will operate in County Durham, should an expected referendum on Regional Assemblies result in a 'Yes' vote. Interestingly, however, district local authority officers and members have begun to lobby central government on the need for unitary authorities (as proposed by INLOGOV), even if a referendum produced a 'No' vote.

Future local and regional government arrangements will inevitably impact on leisure service provision as all leisure and cultural activities are crucial in helping to achieve overall regional strategies contained in the Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Cultural Strategy.

Moreover, as well as helping to achieve the City Council's corporate objectives, leisure services are affected by, and can impact on the County Durham Cultural Strategy and Economic Development Strategy, City of Durham ED Strategy and the newly formed LSP objectives. Furthermore, they can help to achieve the Best Value (BV), Local Service Agreements and Service Delivery Agreements. Implicit in the remainder of this paper is the belief that leisure services can also be a critical element in satisfying social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal objectives.

DEVELOPING A LEISURE SERVICES STRATEGY

Leisure Services cover a lot of activities and the sheer range of local authority provision is both substantial and wide-ranging. The constantly evolving social, economic and political context (locally, sub-regionally and regionally) compounds the difficulties in strategically planning services for a multitude of stakeholder groups. The diversity of Leisure Services in Durham provides a strong basis of partnership working with other agencies such as other local authorities; arts, sports and other professional and business organisations; and the community and voluntary sector. The LS has a core aim 'to ensure that all individuals and communities have the opportunity and access to the wide range of activities that Leisure Services span, no matter what their sex, age, employment status, education, geographic location, or personal and social circumstances'. A healthy lifestyle and the opportunity to benefit from excellent facilities and initiatives is considered to be the right of everyone living or working in the district and officers believe that high quality leisure opportunities at affordable cost is a vital objective. Moreover there is a desire to ensure that everyone across the Council recognises the importance of Leisure Services as a critical support to other service areas in addressing inequalities, satisfying social inclusion targets, regenerating local communities, and improving health, education and quality of life and reducing criminal activity.

At the outset it was decided (and agreed by council officers and the facilitator/researcher) that any strategy produced as a result of the research must:

- Contribute to the corporate plan
- Build on a previous Healthy Lifestyle Initiative
- Raise the profile of the Leisure Services department
- Encourage new partnerships
- Aid the strategies of related agencies
- Improve understanding of the role Leisure Services might have in regeneration and neighbourhood renewal.

The Leisure Strategy was developed to comply with a Best Value Inspection and Service Profiles for all City Council departments were developed to substantiate linkages across the Authority. It had been recognised that Leisure Services alone could not achieve strategic objectives; the strategic process thus focused upon raising awareness of its role in improving the health, education and quality of life of communities across the district, building bridges between the internal and external

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agencies and organisations within leisure provision, and contributing to regeneration and social welfare more generally. Despite changes to social patterns of work and leisure, participation in leisure and sporting activities by disadvantaged groups is still relatively low. Unlike other service areas, Leisure faced constant pressure to either scale down services, contract out provision, and revise pricing structures. Such strategies can produce short-term impacts, but those disadvantaged and disempowered communities most in need of Leisure Service provision are the long-term losers. Decisions in the past had been made against a backdrop of service need within reduced budgets, and competition for revenue streams, resources which impinged upon other social and welfare budgets.

Although the Leisure Strategy has been designed to be a catalyst for Leisure Services provision for the whole population, it aimed particularly at engaging hard-to-reach groups and individuals. It clarified where future resources and capabilities could be deployed more efficiently and effectively, and encouraged stakeholder involvement in decision-making, within and beyond the Council. By working in partnership with other agencies in arts, tourism, health, education, and criminal justice, the strategy offered a valuable way to realise the overall aim of raising the quality of life for the various communities across the district. This is consistent with the aims of the Local Government Act 2000, with its emphasis on overall economic, social and environmental concerns, framed within the view that elected local government has a role as a multi-purpose service provider in the context of a wider welfare state (Stoker, 2001)

By adopting a more innovative and entrepreneurial change process, the Leisure Strategy embodied an underlying philosophical change in strategy. In identifying the overall Council corporate objectives, and aligning them to those of other departments and agencies beyond Leisure Services, the strategy identified how policy consensus might be facilitated and resources pooled, so that agencies, communities and individuals could take joint action. Despite the plethora of partnership and network activities, the research revealed the widespread view that many such arrangements are not *real* partnerships capable of bringing about change, but rather contractual arrangements only.

The need to address five priority target areas drove the process: health; education; equality; access to sport; and anti-social behaviour. All five priorities were drawn from a combination of centrally and locally derived objectives on neighbourhood renewal/regeneration. Leisure Services can impact on all of the key areas of central government's regeneration agenda, by direct service provision or by acting jointly to facilitate the provision from other service areas – e.g. supporting existing programmes being undertaken by health, education and criminal justice agencies. In isolation, Leisure Services are limited in what they can achieve, but by supporting other mainstream providers, and pooling and sharing resources and capabilities greater benefits can be derived.

An example of joined-up action is that of Leisure Service personnel working closely with Durham LEA, the police, the Primary Care Trust and other agencies to identify and implement programmes to address anti-social behaviour. By supporting the work of mainstream service

deliverers, resources deployed on improved leisure services were used to stimulate preventative activities and ameliorate the negative effects of poor lifestyle. Similarly in health, there are plans to devote a portion of mainstream budgets for the treatment of diabetes, heart attacks, and strokes towards supporting positive lifestyle changes support lifestyle changes. The Healthy Lifestyle Partnership, regarded as an exemplar in this area, was set up to facilitate such activities.

Leisure Service personnel were found to provide a critical professional input into a broad range of networks and partnerships, alongside representatives from mainstream and other agencies, such as universities, voluntary and community sector, education, health and criminal justice professionals. These were identified as constituting a strong foundation to stimulate future community-led, or new preventative initiatives.

Leisure Services Strategic Group

At the beginning of the strategy process, the Leisure Services strategic group was encouraged to meet regularly; internal and external experts were used in support, to examine and evaluate plans for Leisure Service provision. This strategic group (led by the author, as facilitator) agreed: (i) a common set of priorities; (ii) how to involve stakeholders; (iii) actions and perceived barriers; and (iv) access to information and data. Roles and responsibilities were systematically determined, and a rigorous management performance monitoring and evaluation system created.

Existing secondary source data resources, including in-house and external documentation that might impact, or have some connection to this Strategy was identified. The data was used to avoid duplication, to identify evidence of good practice across the authority, and to gain a greater understanding of internal and external linkages. A meeting with the CEO allowed the strategic group to clarify the key issues facing the Council within a dynamic and devolved context.

This was followed by a widespread consultation exercise to reflect the most relevant issues across the district. Two strategic workshops with senior heads of related services (see Appendix 1), plus in-depth interviews, focus groups and feedback sessions with service managers in the six District Zones (each zone has a Leisure Centre), and selected community representatives.

Strategic issues, internal and external forces, linkages between departments, the role of key stakeholders and the future direction of Leisure and Community Services were identified. The findings were used to understand how each participant's area of work linked into Leisure Services and overall corporate objectives. Exploring shared experiences across the authority helped to build trust between the various actors as an integral element of developing strategy. Leisure Services personnel then began to appreciate the complexities of other Service Departments. They were able to understand the cultures and practices of operating in other

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departments, and the strength of bringing people together from diverse professional and service backgrounds

This was effectively the first cross-cutting review ever conducted in the Council. The strategic group was able to identify current provision and benchmark activities with other local authorities. In this way, the group was in a better position to understand how each department could contribute to Leisure Service provision within the framework of corporate objectives. Service profiles from related services illustrated commonalities and synergies, as well as identifying possibilities for joined-up and integrated service delivery, and the elimination of duplication. Leisure Services, as part of housing, community and environmental health, is currently split into two parts (strategic leisure and leisure services). Jointly managing these diverse sections had always been problematic. Identifiable differences in working practices, philosophy, and ownership issues created tensions, while issues of data collection and sharing of information were identified as weaknesses in the Best Value Review.

Consultation with users/community groups

A Lifestyle Exhibition, set up to promote the Leisure Services Department, raised awareness across six zonal areas. To facilitate inclusion, a scheduled bus was provided for those in outlying areas. A 'Lifestyle' publication was widely distributed to every household and Leisure staff also conducted presentations in every school. Interactive displays, exhibitions, competitions, displays, and presentations were used to raise awareness, but also to identify individuals and groups prepared to attend Consultation events. This Exhibition, the first of its kind mounted by the Authority, attracted hundreds of visitors. It also had the benefit of stimulating school and community partnerships. These long-term relationships are considered an important element of future departmental monitoring, and review of service provision.

Consultation meetings took place at venues throughout the district, with as broad and representative stakeholder groups and individuals as possible. The sample was drawn from membership constituencies - all Leisure Centres; households; schools; community and community partnership groups; SRB (women's clubs etc.); the police; churches and parish councillors.

These events were organised to explore a specific set of issues surrounding Leisure Service provision and to elicit views in relation to achieving the five identified objectives. Bringing together users, to engage them in discussion and record their views, allowed clear categorisation of key issues, and these were matched to the five key areas. These consultation groups helped leisure staff to appreciate consumer perspectives on service provision. Trade Union Convenors and shop stewards who represent Leisure Services staff were involved throughout the whole strategic process. Their participation helped to achieve the twin aims of transparency and good industrial relations, as well as satisfying the 'inclusion' element of Best Value.

Identification of service delivery improvements

A Challenge Day involving all LS staff and managers of leisure facilities was organised, and, with the use of a framework of questions devised by the Improvement and Development Agency, identified service delivery gaps. This was followed by a one-day Creativity Day involving 12-15 key stakeholder organisations. Prior to each event, copies of the Authority's Service Profiles, Best Value Scoping Report, and summary of the Best Value Inspection process to date were distributed to participants (see Appendix 2).

The Creativity Day was used to identify service delivery options, and to highlight how positive improvements might be achieved, in line with customer expectations and the need to make better use of existing resources. The main points to emerge were:

- The need for cost effective services and widening access
- Satisfying Social Exclusion agenda
- Coping with shrinking resource base
- Providing a solution to management of the Gala Theatre
- Enhancing links with Durham Sport (a University-led initiative)
- Adapting to the changing health, education and crime agenda
- Working collaboratively with other stakeholders

Areas of policy focus to address these points were identified as follows: access and equity issues; transport; funding; disabled/excluded groups; poverty; ethnic groups; the elderly.

The consultation process led to the identification of a range of strategic service options for the City Council. These included:

- Continue to support sports centres, swimming, healthy lifestyles, outreach in communities
- Strive for excellence (i.e. become a Beacon in Leisure Services provision)
- Drive social inclusion agenda (e.g. through crèches, arts facilities etc.)
- Make links to Sure Start agenda (e.g. establish baby gyms, aerobics for mothers etc.)
- Support community activities (salsa dancing, flower arranging, hymn singing)
- Market services more effectively
- Link local transport schemes to events and facilities
- Make more use of community halls
- Distribute maps, bus timetables, and assist people to access information via the internet
- Broaden outreach scope

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The consultation process revealed collective support for the idea that the City Council should continue with:

- The Lifestyle Initiative
- Sports and physical development
- Walking Programmes
- Developing wheelchair paths
- Maintaining light towpaths near the river
- Improving public toilets and other amenities
- Its positive agenda on social inclusion (with affordability and accessibility at core)
- Developing exciting activities for bored youth

At the same time, the exercise revealed little support for the City Council providing:

- Sunbeds in Leisure Centres (very unpopular and a hazard to health); cigarette machines; and services duplicated by other providers

Among the suggestions for innovative activities were the following:

- Internet cafés for young people
- Target young girls with 'funky' initiatives, to encourage their involvement in various activities
- Promote holistic therapies and encourage small scale businesses (e.g. massage, beauticians, Indian head massages)
- Reduce youth crime by linking with community safety and criminal justice agencies
- Provide skateboarding facilities and leadership opportunities relating to diverse sports activities
- Revive play schemes and rover buses
- Develop a website to market activities
- Ask for new ideas on events management; provide an events calendar
- Facilitate access to health specialisms (e.g. smoking cessation)
- Explore opportunities linked to innovative river management

Themes identified within the framework of developing innovative activities include: intergenerational activities; improving training; developing funding streams for joint initiatives; integrating programmes into GP referrals and cardiac rehabs; and greater use of facilities in colleges, schools and universities.

CONCLUSION

The City Council, like all other councils, is operating in a dynamic local, sub-regional and regional system of governance. The strong internal links between Leisure Services and Economic Development/Business Development, Health, Education, Criminal Justice, Arts, Tourism and Regeneration have given the Department a strong co-ordinating role and the potential to draw together numerous disparate and fragmented service areas. Externally, there is a high degree of institutional and community capacity already embedded into established linkages. Leisure Services already connects with local individuals and groups, as well as with other levels of governance and the business, voluntary, community and charitable sectors. These links provide a sound basis for future activities, while also satisfying central government targets on social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal.

There are many issues confronting the local authority in general, but more specifically the Leisure Services Department. As multi-purpose service providers operating in a wider context of welfare service provision, strategy inevitably needs to confront problems such as duplicated efforts and boundary issues. Strategic planning is always difficult in local government where issues emerge in response to the dynamic context (new demands, problems and issues).

A key finding to emerge from this research is the lack of appropriate leisure activities for young and disempowered individuals, and poor transport to enable them to participate in good quality services at relatively low cost. This lack of service provision is perceived to contribute towards anti-social behaviour. Currently, 90% of Leisure Service's budget is spent on managing costly Leisure Centres, which largely attract a white, middle-class clientele. Only 10% of overall spend is devoted to developmental work in communities. There is a case for reallocating such spending so that a significantly greater share is devoted towards enhancing the good practice already in evidence at a community/neighbourhood level, rather than running Leisure Centres. Plans to put the management of the Centres in the hands of a Public/Private Partnership are being considered by the Cabinet. This could release substantial revenue and capital for deployment in community development schemes. By selling off facilities that are neither satisfying Council nor community needs, monies might be better spent on using staff and resources in developing community capacities.

Future plans depend, to a large extent, on the outcome of the Boundary Commission Report and a possible Regional Assembly for the North East, but there is an internal case for merging the Leisure Services Department with the department that includes economic and business development, arts, tourism, culture and regeneration. The current situation, where leisure is aligned with housing and environmental health, is anomalous. Chief Officers believe that such a merger could bring about the innovative, creative and entrepreneurial shift needed to develop new ways of delivering high quality and cost effective services. In continuing to have Leisure Services attached to more traditional service delivery areas of housing and environmental health, and focusing resources on waste collection and house repairs, the officers feel hampered and unable to respond effectively to changing leisure demands. The out-dated and costly Leisure Centres (designed in the 1960s and '70s) are no longer seen by many as appropriate for modern

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day community needs. Furthermore they provide no real benefit for the Authority in terms of satisfying central government targets on regenerating local neighbourhoods.

Externally, a more radical alternative could be to absorb some of the work of other agencies such as health, education and criminal justice into Leisure Service provision - for example, using Leisure Centres as one-stop-shops for welfare, or as drop-in centres. Alternatively, leisure resources and staff could be better utilised in providing support, know-how, linkages and other expertise to facilitate and lubricate the work of other agencies. In this way, the latter could tap into the knowledge base, relationships and inter-connections that Leisure Services staff have developed over the years. Many are trained in community and youth work, sport development and other related professions, which helps them to understand community networks and linkages, and gives them an accessibility denied to other local authority professionals. It also provides a good basis for appreciating the inter-linked social problems contributing to multiple deprivation.

With the demise of traditional community and village halls, many of the former mining villages in the City district have no real central focus, and in aligning service areas such as leisure, health, education, employment and criminal justice, fragmentation in communities might be addressed. Of course, much depends on the capacity and willingness of agency representatives to allow mainstream services, mainly funded from central government sources to be combined in this way. One vital barrier to such change is the need to align budgets and other resources. This article has attempted to show the potential for greater collaboration, and the wide-ranging improvements that could be made with more creative thinking, innovative practices and entrepreneurial approaches to Leisure Services delivery.

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APPENDIX I

Service Heads involved in Strategy Workshops

- Economic Development and Business Support x2
- Human Resources x1
- Leisure and Community Services x3
- Tourism x1
- Healthy Living Centre
- SRB team x2
- Durham City Arts x1

APPENDIX 2

Agencies/organsations involved in Creativity Day

- Age Concern
- New College, Adult Education
- Tourism
- Health Promotion
- Durham University Sport
- Education (LEA and local headteacher)
- Primary Care Trust
- County Council (Community Services)
- Sports Academy
- Economic and business development