

In this section

- 13 Opinion - David Minton
- 14 Legal - 2012 Olympics
- 15 Insight - River cruising
- 16 Insight - Carbon Footprint / Real Estate Investment
- 18 Insight - Budget gyms
- 20 Feature - Neteller
- 21 Appointments
- 22 Sharewatch, Diary dates

Insight



Forget the terror threat, says **David Minton**, we're more at risk from obesity, so why not introduce a national sports card to monitor fitness participation?

Fats and figures

I've come to the conclusion that the obese, disabled and the bulk of the ageing population flock to garden centres, particularly over a bank holiday weekend. That's not meant to be a Duncan Bannatyne style of inflammatory statement, just fact. I know it happens because I've seen it, admired it and got caught up in it. Of course it's not just bank holidays, most weekends and every Tuesday, a universal popular day for ageing discounts, gets the infirm and physically challenged off the couch and into the garden centre tea rooms.

We're talking big numbers; 46% of men in England and 32% of women are overweight (a BMI of 25-39 kg/m sq) with an additional 17% of men and 21% of women are classified as obese (a BMI of more than 30). The overweight and obesity figures are still increasing and have already roughly doubled since the mid-1980s. The prevalence of obesity increases with age throughout childhood. In 1996, around 13% of 8 year olds and 17% of 15 year olds in England were obese. These levels of childhood obesity are likely to exacerbate the trend towards increased overweight and obesity in the adult population: compared to thin children, obese children have a two-fold increase in the risk of becoming overweight adults. Using the widest definition, more than one in five adults, that's around 11 million people, have some form of disability. Then we do have an ageing population; over 16% are over 65 and almost 12% are over 70.

Put the ageing and the disability challenges together and the World Health Organisation claims that we have on average 17 years of disability before we die. Although I've got no idea of the numbers who are collectively over 65/70 years of age, classified as obese and suffering from some form of disability, they do like a day out like the rest of us. I did think that brands like Fitness First for Women and specialist brands like Motorcise Healthy Living Centres should be recruiting new members among these perfectly un-healthy demographics.

So be it a garden centre, vineyard or stately home, I've been to all three lately with ageing and infirm in-tow, and I was really impressed how well they know their customers and cater for them. At each site they found an unobtrusive way of finding out at least my full postcode or my home address. All three sites know visitor numbers in some detail and the profile of each person who paid at the till. For these leisure sites, both are vital bits of information which help them manage their business. These relatively small businesses, reliant on primary and secondary

spend, (only the stately home charged an additional small entrance fee) probably have similar visitor numbers and turnover to a large sports centre or good multi-purpose fitness club. Yet the detailed customer knowledge is absent from many of the public sports sites and some private ones too.

The new sports minister, Gerry Sutcliffe, speaking publicly for the first time since he took over from Richard Caborn, said he wants to make increasing participation in physical activities his top priority. He quoted the Fitness Industry Association figures that 98% of the population live within a 20-minute drive time of a good facility – but said the challenge was how to encourage more people to use these venues. So, minister, if participation is the goal that you want to achieve – what's the starting point?

Well, firstly let's pay thanks to the former minister Richard Caborn. He (and Tessa Jowell) found the money to establish the first full audit of sports sites.

The more we understand about barriers, investment links, type, and amount of participation, the more questions are raised

This is now available to everyone through the Sport England website www.activeplaces.com, and this includes all public and private fitness sites too. From this starting point we can work out how many of the population are covered by all these sites within, say a two-mile radius, (88% of the population) or by the 20-minutes drive time, as above. It is now relatively easy to provide answers to questions on how many sports sites open and close each year, age of venues, range of facilities and cost to take part. What's more difficult is confirming and proving participation rates at these venues. Understanding participation is of course a large subject. The more we understand about barriers, investment links, type, and amount of participation - the more questions are raised. Two major pieces of work are helping fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge but we still have a big hole to fill in actual sports participation.

Sport England, through the ground breaking Active People survey (with 363,724 completed interviews), have compiled the most meaningful data on the proportion of people participating in sport for at least 30 minutes, three times per week

along with information on volunteering. The data identifies how participation varies from place to place and between different groups in the population. The questionnaire was designed to enable analysis of the findings by a broad range of demographic information such as gender, social class, ethnicity, household structure, age and disability. To add to our understanding the demographic data has been used to build detailed sports segmentation types which will be launched in the autumn. This work has been completed by Experian who own Mosaic, the de facto segmentation system used across the fitness industry.

Furthermore, 1.8 million live fitness member records were profiled last year using Mosaic to create the first National Audit of Fitness Consumers, published by The Leisure Database Company. Information from this first audit has been used to understand who's already participating and why some Mosaic types are eight times less likely to participate. To improve participation in the fitness industry we have a good starting point and this year will see the national audit of fitness consumers growing to around three million live records.

The black hole however is actual participation at sports venues, where an estimated £2.2bn has been invested over the past decade. A similar amount will probably be spent in the run-up to 2012 so it seems timely that actual participation is monitored in some detail, at these sites, but how do we measure it?

Well, firstly we need to phase out the concept of pay and play – it's as outdated as the '50 Plus' campaign! The idea that someone can walk into a leisure centre and go swimming and play various sports without the owners or managers knowing who they are doesn't make sense when everything we do needs to be evidence based.

A primary centre membership (nearest to home or work) needs to be introduced. And why not extend it to a member of one, member of all policy? If the London Fitness Network can expand throughout the country why not develop a national sports card? Via the CRM systems link actual sports participation to membership records which can be downloaded on a regular basis. I know this is possible because I've seen it!

Minister, we have 4,007 public sports centres available throughout the country. I'm curious to know who's using them and how often. Aren't you?

David Minton is director of The Leisure Database Company