

The quest for improvement

With a relaunch in the pipeline and plans to raise public awareness, Quest plans to take centre stage in 2011. Quest's new directors, Caroline Constantine and Joe Ryan, explain their vision for the future.

Our message is simple: Quest is back in action, open for business and soon to be bigger and better. The UK quality scheme for sport and leisure is having something of a 'moment'. Taken over by Right Directions, in partnership with Leisure-net Solutions, earlier this year, it is now full steam ahead for a new, enhanced Quest in 2011. Over the last 10 years Quest has improved facility management beyond belief but the time has come for an update. The framework needs a major overhaul to make sure it is fit for purpose, reflective of the current climate and more applicable to the leisure industry it serves.

Although the new, improved scheme is set to change the face of Quest, the basic principles will remain. Quest is an assessment process delivered by leisure professionals. It involves mystery visits and a two-day assessments every two years, after which centres get an overall Quest score. Leisure facilities are currently tested on four main categories: operations (eg cleaning, maintenance and health and safety), customers (eg marketing and customer care), staffing (including staff qualifications) and service development (such as continuous improvement).

Unlike other quality marks, Quest stands out because it is leisure-specific; it is the only award that solely assesses leisure facilities and sports development teams. Plus all assessors have leisure management experience. Our assessors have been there and done it; centres can't pull the wool over their eyes so the mark they get is genuine. They understand the specifics of running leisure and culture facilities, which is what makes the Quest audit so valuable. It is like accreditation with built-in consultancy.

While these fundamentals will not change, Right Directions and Leisure-net Solutions have a vision for how the scheme could be improved. Twelve years ago there were a few very good leisure facilities but the rest lagged way behind. Quest has already encouraged leisure facilities to up the ante and, in doing so, brought the majority up to a good standard. Now it is time to create a product that will drive continuous improvement across the entire leisure industry, from fitness centres to ice rinks. The only way to do this is to refresh the scheme.

The refresh will involve input from the entire industry. Representatives from local authorities, leisure trusts, contractors, governing bodies, institutes and universities will all take part in a working group at the beginning of December to thrash out their vision for a new Quest and how it should be delivered. The new scheme will be launched at a national conference in March 2011, with the first assessments against the updated standards set take place the following month.

Between us, Right Directions and Leisure-net Solutions have years and years of experience in this sector. We know where Quest is going wrong and we've got a vision of how to put it right. While the Right Directions board have been involved with Quest for the last 10 years, both through their Quest-registered client base and as assessors, Leisure-net Solutions has strategic links throughout the industry and unparalleled experience of the National Benchmarking Service (NBS). What's more, as an operational team, the Quest partners have their feet firmly on the ground. We all know what it's like to sit in a leisure centre watching your child have swimming lessons on a Saturday morning. We are the customers we're trying to please.

Improvements have started already, with a drive to retrain or remove inconsistent assessors and mystery shoppers. We are aware of what has gone wrong in the past so our first priority was to ensure the standard of assessors and mystery visitors is consistently high.

Although not currently linked, it is also hoped that the NBS, which provides

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leisure facilities with critical data on their performance, will become a necessary part of Quest accreditation in the future. NBS, working with the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University, collects and analyses participation, financial and customer satisfaction data to ensure leisure providers know exactly what their customers think of them and how they can make their offering better. A closer link makes sense, says Leisure-net Solutions' managing director, Mike Hill: "Leisure facilities would only stand to benefit if Quest – which currently focuses solely on systems and processes – also took customers' opinions into consideration."

Moving forwards, the new vision involves two levels of Quest – an entry level, with a one-day assessment that takes in the core fundamentals of running a leisure facility, and a more advanced level for centres that want to push themselves beyond the basic badge. The new entry level will be more financially viable to enable every facility, from a school pool to a small local sports hall, to benchmark themselves. At the advanced level, we hope to allow leisure facilities the freedom to diversify and pick specific modules to be assessed on in addition to the core areas. These modules are yet to be announced but may include areas such as inclusive fitness and swimming lessons. They will allow facilities to grow and specialise their offering in order to more effectively meet customers' needs.

The new and improved Quest scheme will also be more economically viable, something not to be underestimated in light of recent government spending cuts. While we fully understand that some centres will withdraw from Quest in the current climate, we are hoping to convince the industry that the quick financial win of pulling out, or choosing not to go for Quest accreditation at all, is outweighed by the financial benefits in the long-term. Not only do centres get all the supporting information and guidance notes for a one-off fee – saving them the much greater cost of employing a dedicated in-house quality manager – but if they really take the assessors' comments on board it could more than offset the cost of assessment. To give an example, one of our assessors walks straight past reception and into their local leisure centre, does a fitness class then has a swim; they do not pay a penny. If that leisure centre responds to our comments by installing turnstiles or putting ticket checks in place, it will make a massive difference to their revenue and offset the cost of accreditation time and time again. And that's just from one specific comment – an entire report could increase income by thousands.

With plans to get the public on side too, Quest looks set to make its mark in 2011. The vision is to let the public know what Quest is, that they have a voice and there is a nationwide scheme to help them choose the best place to spend their leisure time. Everyone knows the difference between a 5* and a 2* hotel; surely it should be the same in leisure? The government's overarching agenda is to get more people active; that doesn't just have to be in gyms. The public should be able to choose from good, clean, safe facilities nationwide – be that a swimming pool, an ice rink or a golf club – and Quest is the improvement tool to help achieve that.

Caroline Constantine is Quest operations director and joint MD of Right Directions. Joe Ryan is joint managing director of Right Directions.

For more information, visit www.questnbs.org/

The Leisure Review, December/January 2010/11

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