

S&PA News

A round-up of the latest developments in the industry



TIME TO TURN OFF?

By Rachel Masker

Leisure centres and gyms across the country are reducing their opening hours, making pools cooler and turning off hot tubs due to sky-high energy bills.

Job cuts and price hikes are also on the agenda as operators face a double whammy of a slow return of customers post-lockdown and soaring energy costs.

Long opening hours, power-hungry gym equipment and heated pools create a formula for very high energy bills.

Better Leisure, one of the UK's largest pool providers, has been forced to reduce opening hours this winter.

The enterprise, which runs 268

centres across the UK, said its energy costs have more than tripled since 2019 and is now equal to 25% of the total cost of running each site.

More than 200 centres will have shorter hours from December until Easter (9 April 2023). Mark Sesnan, CEO of parent company GLL, wrote in an email: "In practice, some centres will open an hour later or close one hour earlier on some days. This will enable us to turn off lighting, plant and equipment at the time of maximum energy use, when it's coldest and darkest. This is also when we are least busy."

Active Nations, a health and wellbeing charity, runs 18 leisure venues, including seven pools, on behalf of councils. Most are centred around the Midlands and South of England. The charity is also facing bills 300% higher than in 2019.

CEO Stuart Martin (*right, inset*) said operators typically had energy deals fixed for three years, or even longer – and a sizeable chunk of the price hike has come sharply in the last year.

He said: "We are feeling the pain now because our contract ended in September, but other operators may not feel the effects for another six months or so. Unlike the pandemic, this crisis isn't happening to everyone at the same time. The effects are more staggered."

Active Nations is cutting 50 jobs at HQ and local centres by Christmas – 10% of the workforce. The challenge is to make savings without compromising safety, said the charity boss: "You still have to lifeguard the pool." It was a "tough call" to make because Active Nations had survived the pandemic without shedding any staff, added Martin.

Pool temperatures have already been reduced by 2 deg C. "We haven't had any complaints," said Martin. While membership remains unchanged at an average £42 per month, prices for individual pool and gym sessions and classes have risen by 3-5% to help balance the books.

Despite a government scheme providing a discount to businesses for six months from 1 October to protect them from soaring prices so they are "able to get through the winter", some public pools have already shut their doors, including South Moulton Pool in Devon, run by 1610.

More than 100 pools are under threat of closure or reduced hours due to the energy price crisis, according to Swim England. While some local authorities have agreed rescue packages, the reality is council budgets are under growing pressure, says the national governing body for swimming.

Derbyshire Dales District Council stepped in with £204k extra funding for four centres run on its behalf by

Freedom Leisure to support them through the energy price crisis.

The cash injection is equal to about 75% of the increase in costs, says the council.

Freedom Leisure



UPFRONT

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temporarily closed two pools at Willen Lakes, Milton Keynes and Rye Sports Centre, East Sussex after its CEO Ivan Horsfall Turner announced its “crippling” energy bill had increased from £8m to £20m. The non-profit, which runs about 60 pools on behalf of councils and teaches 2,000 children to swim on a weekly basis, is backing Swim England’s nationwide #SaveOurPools petition.

Freedom Leisure has also reduced opening hours at seven of the sports centres it runs on behalf of Brighton and Hove City Council and is proposing job cuts and price hikes at five leisure centres it manages for New Forest District Council.

In the private sector, **Nuffield Health** has closed its spa pools and turned off its Jacuzzis until spring. The gym giant owns 114 facilities – all pools – and said the decision allowed them to keep their pools, steam rooms and saunas open. **Better Gyms**, which operates 258 council-owned gyms, is facing similar challenges. The operator is reducing the temperature of the water and air in their pools by 1 deg C on average.

Everyone Active, which runs more than 200 venues on behalf of local councils, is also facing energy bills increases of more than 300% but has no plans to close pools or reduce opening hours. Instead, the enterprise is pushing to become greener by reaching net zero emission targets. David Greenwood, head of operations, said: “As a business we are doing all we can to mitigate the increase energy cost through innovation, investment and educational campaigns.”

For instance, Bourton and Cirencester Everyone Active centres in the Cotswolds among others have switched to renewable energy, replacing gas boilers with air source heat pumps, solar PV panels and solar thermal. Everyone Active is also cutting waste with its ‘Everyone is Saving Energy’ campaign.

Greenwood said rising energy bills are a long-term issue facing the industry. “We will continue to work closely and communicate with our local authority partners as we need their support to secure the future of our leisure centres.”

MESSAGE FROM
CIMSPA CEO

**TARA DILLON ON
THE POSITIVE
IMPACT OUR
SECTOR HAS ON
PEOPLE’S LIVES**

After another difficult year for our sector, I am feeling confident that 2023 will see us return to pre-Covid levels of activity.

Sport England’s latest Active Lives Children and Young People survey shows that children’s activity levels are back to pre-pandemic levels, but also note that more needs to be done.

I’m also encouraged by the significant shift I’ve witnessed over the last year as our sector transitions into health, community and tackling inequalities (see p15).

CIMSPA is focused on ensuring that those who make a difference – our people – are qualified, competent, safe and supported.

2023 also sees the start of our planned strategy to roll out skills hubs to tackle the recruitment and skills shortage, ensuring we have the breadth and depth of skills required to continue to grow our sector with a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

At the time of writing, we are awaiting further details of Energy Bill Relief Scheme. It is essential that Government responds to the sector’s demands for support in light of unsustainable energy costs. Failure to act could mean the closures of much needed facilities and the essential programmes they deliver.

I hope for a positive response from Government and wish you a successful 2023.

SPATEX MAKES ENERGY SAVING ITS PRIORITY

By Michele Bridle, exhibition organiser, SPATEX

Energy saving will top the bill at SPATEX 2023 when the latest water leisure innovations and new products are unveiled at the exhibition’s 27th edition at the Coventry Building Society Arena from Tuesday 31st January to Thursday 2nd February.

With over 100 exhibiting companies, including leading international manufacturers, launching a host of new products, this is a must-attend event for all those involved in the provision and maintenance of water leisure facilities. From spas, wellness suites,

swimming pools and steam rooms to saunas, water features, enclosures and all their ancillary equipment, SPATEX is the one and only chance in 2023 to view the fast-moving, innovative world of water leisure under one roof.



Reducing energy consumption will also feature in SPATEX’s free-to-attend, double seminar programme, along with up-to-the-minute health and safety guidance. CPD points are available for attendees of the technical Workshops. There’s no

better place to seek impartial advice from experts, and all for free.

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