An open & shut case: an investigation of the health impacts of local public swimming pool provision in two Glasgow neighbourhoods

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May 2004
This working paper is based on a previously published academic paper (Thomson H, Kearns A, Petticrew M. Assessing the health impact of local amenities: a qualitative study of contrasting experiences of local swimming pool and leisure provision in two areas of Glasgow. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 2003;57(9):663-667). This report was produced for distribution to study participants and interested parties in health and local authority agencies.

Further analyses and data collection were carried out for this study and future publications are still planned. If you are interested in knowing more about this study and forthcoming publications please contact Hilary Thomson at the address below.

We gratefully acknowledge the participation of local residents in both Pollokshaws and Gorbals, without whom this study would not have been possible.

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Introduction: neighbourhood amenities and health

Levels of health, illness and early death vary widely in different areas of the UK. The death rates for people before age 65 is nearly four times higher in the Shettleston area of Glasgow than an affluent area of Surrey. These big differences are often explained by the numbers of wealthy people living in an area and by differences in healthy lifestyles such as smoking. It is also possible that neighbourhood characteristics and availability of shops and other amenities may also affect health. However, very little is known about the links between local amenities and health and how amenities may be linked to health. In particular, very few studies have asked local residents about their own experiences and view of local amenities and possible health effects.

Swimming pools

Local public swimming pools are an important part of amenity provision for sport and leisure. Swimming, as a form of exercise, has an obvious link to health and is now the UK’s most popular sporting activity. It may seem obvious, therefore, that the closure or opening of a public swimming pool in a neighbourhood may have an effect on residents’ health.

The study

We carried out a study to investigate if and how residents reported links to health and access to a local public swimming pool. Two similar areas of south Glasgow were included in the study; in one area the local pool had recently been closed (Pollokshaws), while in the other area a new pool had recently been opened (Gorbals). Although no two neighbourhoods are the same, both neighbourhoods in the study were broadly similar in terms of size (approx. population=8000) and levels of deprivation.

Focus groups with local residents who had lived in the neighbourhood for over 4 years were carried out in both areas (7 groups in each area). Residents were approached through a variety of neighbourhood groups to represent different age groups e.g. parents of children at a nursery school, members of an elderly peoples lunch club.

Findings

Descriptions of the local neighbourhood

In addition to the closure and opening of the swimming pool, residents in both areas reported other important local changes. In Pollokshaws, there were reports of a number of other amenity closures, a lack of investment and a general decline in the neighbourhood. While in Gorbals, an £80 million housing-led regeneration programme had been undertaken; this included general area improvements and upgrading of the public shopping precinct. In both areas one of the most important changes reported by long term residents was the change in the local population. Many long term residents had left both areas and new people were moving in. Long term residents felt this had an important effect on the nature of the neighbourhood.

The swimming pool: opening and closure

Reports of pool opening
In Gorbals, although the new swimming pool was viewed positively it was not often singled out to be of more value than other amenities and was not a central part of residents’ discussions. This may be due to the range of other ongoing positive investments. Many residents had benefited from new housing, which is likely to have had a bigger impact on personal circumstances than a new swimming facility.

Reports of pool closure
In Pollokshaws, the issue of the pool closure was frequently mentioned and was obviously viewed as an important and negative change in the area. The pool, a large historical building in the centre of the neighbourhood, was the most recent in a series of closures. The closure of the pool was reported as a constant visual reminder and symbol of the decline of the neighbourhood.

Effects of the pool closure

Edna: And it wisnae that- it brought life into that bit of the area, because it was lit up. The huge big dome, the whole place had an aura about it. But now you go up there, you've nae light, the building is dim. The weans have smashed whatever lights hanging about, it's dreary, it's frightening. That's how the shops are shutting because naebody is there at night, whereas when the baths were opened at night it lit the whole area up.

Jean: Aye till about 10 o'clock even, even like you could park up next to it.

Edna: People were coming backward and forwards but now there's nae reason for anybody to go up there.

Pollokshaws: middle aged men and women (P4)

Barbara: When we moved in, it was a high amenity area because you had the baths, the library, the station, the buses, the steamie. Everything was handy, now it's a deprived area.

Pollokshaws: elderly women, 65+ years (P3)

Agnes: And thanks to the powers that be- they made this one of the biggest ghettos on the south side, the day they closed the swimming baths, it was the only thing that the kids had to go and do here. There’s no other amenities other than the church and any other church groups round about have to use. So that was thanks to them this place became- it’s over night they made it into a ghetto practically.
The previous quotes show how residents linked the pool closure with other negative changes in the area. The pool closure was thought to have led to increased vandalism, fewer people using public space, reduced feelings of safety and closure of other amenities. The effects of the pool closure and increased vandalism was also linked to further decline in the area generally.

Pool closure and choice of living environment
Residents compared the impact of the pool closure on them with residents in more affluent neighbouring areas where most people had access to a car. The effects of swimming pool closure were thought to be worse for those living in already difficult circumstances and in a disadvantaged area.

Personal and area disadvantage

| Alan: | I’m not trying to bring this place down because I stay in it. But I know fine well that is how it is. If you have got money you can afford to send them [to the swimming pool]. That baths being shut, that won’t affect a lot of people in Newlands [neighbouring affluent area to Pollokshaws] or whatever it is, you have got a car and you have got all of these things. |
| Karen: | For instance they close that [the swimming pool] and then expect you to go to Gorbals, which to me in a winters night... go along and walk all along to Gorbals? You just don’t do it. A car at the door yeah that helps... |

The pool closure was also used as a heartfelt illustration of the lack of choice and control available to residents about the state of their neighbourhood, as well as restricted access to opportunities and control over their own lifestyle choices. Although residents recognised that they may not have made regular use of the pool when it was open the lack of choice was resented.

No choice

| Louise: | I have only used this baths once, but I have only been here 4 years. I used to go to Govanhill Calder Street because I thought it was nicer to be honest, and I have taken the wee one there just the once, but after that we go to the one in the Pollok Centre. That has been carefully planned they have got waves and everything and a chute. But I have to plan that, that is only once in a blue moon, that is a treat because we have to get a bus out there. |
| Danielle: | I think it is the fact that it isn’t there anymore. It was there before, we could have used it, but it is not there any more and we have no choice |
| Natalie: | People realised later on, instead of taking it for granted. |
| Jane: | Aye you don’t miss it until you’ve not got it. And you say wait a minute it’s the choice, as well you have no choice, peoples choices are being taken away. |

Pollokshaws: parents of pre-school children (male & female) (P1)
Use and benefits of the pool

In both Gorbals and Pollokshaws the pool was reported to be an important amenity; use and benefits linked to the pool were similar in both areas, although clear and direct accounts of the pool were more common in Pollokshaws. For this reason quotes from Pollokshaws have mainly been used for illustrative purposes in this report.

Links were made between health and the physical exercise enjoyed at the swimming pool and its associated leisure facilities. However, there were very few accounts of regular use (i.e. weekly or more) of the leisure centre or pool for physical exercise. Despite this, there was an unexplained link between pool provision and health, both physical and mental. In all focus groups, social contact was reported to be ‘good for you’ and part of a healthy life. The pool was reported to be an important place for social contact with friends and neighbours across all age groups and this was directly linked to mental health. Social contact was thought to promote positive mental health through relief of stress and isolation, and as an opportunity to share difficult experiences of living on a low income.

### Not just a swimming pool: a place for **physical AND mental health**

**Bernie:** Well we used to go to the keep-fit (held in the swimming pool building) every Tuesday night and that was a women’s night from 6 o’clock to 10 o’clock at night, and that was stowed every night of the week. So I mean that was keeping us healthy I mean although we smoke and everything else, but we were still going there, keeping healthy, keeping fit, going for a swim and then going home. It was £3.20 we paid for the whole night and we had a swim, all the aerobics and everything else that they were teaching us.

**Maggie:** You can go to any of the big health centres ........

**Bernie:** But we felt better for going there at least once a week, we felt good within ourselves going down the road with a chippy

[Everybody laughing]

**Maggie:** You worked it off before you ate your chippy........

**Bernie:** I wisnae going to lose weight I was going to the keep fit. I was only going to the keep fit anyway. But I mean it was still a night out for like mothers who couldn’t go up, all right there was a wee night out for the mothers on a Tuesday, all right it was keep fit but we all went and we had a laugh. We can’t do that now, and it was quite easy to go up and back down.

**Pollokshaws: parents of pre-school children** (P6)

Certain groups in the neighbourhood were thought to be especially in need of amenities like the swimming pool and its role as a place to socialise; in particular mothers of young children, those living alone and elderly people.

Mothers of young children reported using the pool as a stress reliever to help cope with lively young children, as well as an opportunity to leave their household demands and socialise with other adults.
In Pollokshaws many of the outdoor park and play areas had deteriorated and were considered unsafe due to hazards such as hypodermic needles and broken glass. This, together with cramped housing conditions and no access to a private garden (most of the housing was hi-rise) increased the need for secure public space for children to participate in safe, physical activity and play. The pool closure added to the lack of safe play areas for children.

Children in Gorbals were also a priority group of pool users; but the suggestion of the pool as a stress reliever for parents was not as obvious as in Pollokshaws. Many families with children in Gorbals had moved from hi-rises to terrace houses with a private garden. It may be that, in light of these and other area improvements, living conditions had improved making the need for safe, secure public play areas for children less essential.

### The pool as a stress reliever for parents of young children

**Interviewer:** Do you think this is an exercise thing do you think the negative thing of it closing is just that folk…?

**Davy:** Well, everything, social.

**Anne:** For some it was social, and for some it was exercise, some it was a hobby. It depends on how you look at it. Some of, maybe, of the younger kids, you took them, you sort of monitored them but it let them release a lot of tension. Meant like when you got home they were exhausted and, right bed. And you would get peace and quiet for an hour [laughs] so it lets you unwind. Whereas now they are totally about your feet you are hyper and they are hyper and you are… (flop sound as if exhausted)

**Fiona:** That’s another thing, they are not allowed to play in the corridors, they can’t play there, you can’t let them out. You can’t let them play in the corridor, so they are stuck in the house, so they get bored stiff as well.

**Pollokshaws: middle aged parents (P5)**
Other amenities
Although reports of pool use in Gorbals were less obvious than in Pollokshaws, residents in Gorbals did talk about the importance of access to other local amenities, e.g. food shops, betting shops, community cafe. In Gorbals the benefits linked to these amenities were similar to the benefits linked to the pool in Pollokshaws. Apart from the obvious benefits of the amenity, e.g. food provision through a grocers, local amenities were seen to provide an important opportunity for social contact between local residents. Again the benefit of social contact was linked to improved mental health through relief of feelings of stress and isolation.

### Appropriate amenity provision to promote positive mental health

**Elizabeth:** You cant just take like certain groups of people, like where I’m saying about the bookies. [betting shop] The older men maybe have been out of work for a long time and they’ve no got anywhere to go to, they’re still in the house, so you know, they’re just in the house. That gets them out for that wee while, to get to meet people and everything about it is getting out and meeting people. I think gives you a bit of a…you know, a lift.

**May:** Well you’ll no go in to a depression so much. Especially a man living on his own. You take away the bookies [betting shop], he’s no just going to keep walking about the streets and stand and blather to somebody. Whereas you always blather to somebody when you are watching the racing. There’s a difference there, isn’t there?

**Riverside: middle aged women (G6)**

Public neighbourhood amenities generally may be an important opportunity for social contact between local residents, although, from the quote above it is appears that a range of amenity types is required if the needs of different resident groups in the neighbourhood are to be met.
Conclusions

- Closure of a local amenity may add to residents feelings of lack of choice and control. Assessing the impact of a new amenity is more difficult when other significant investment has taken place.

- It is unclear whether the closure or opening of the swimming pools had any impact on residents physical health but mental health impacts were reported.

- Neighbourhood amenities, like public swimming pools, may promote positive mental health and wellbeing among local residents by providing a safe public place for meeting people.

- Links between casual social contact among residents and positive mental health may be explained by reducing feelings of stress, isolation and sharing common difficulties of life.

- Certain groups, such as the elderly, parents with young children and those with no access to a car may particularly benefit from local amenity provision.

- A range of different amenity types is required to cater for different resident groups.