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What is access? A discussion of the definition and measurement of interest group access

Keywords: Interest groups, Access, Democracy, Measurement

Abstract

Interest group research has focused extensively on political access. While access does not guarantee influence, it is customarily seen as a crucial step towards gaining political influence. It is argued that groups with access are, all else equal, more likely to be influential than groups without access. Biased access may thus result in biased influence. Based on a review of this literature, the article shows how the concept of access rests on an intuitive understanding rather than an explicit definition. This hampers methodological discussions of measurement. We propose to define access as instances where a group has entered a political arena (parliament, administration, or media) passing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers (politicians, civil servants, or journalists). Based on this discussion, we compare operationalisations based on our proposed definition with some of the major alternatives found in the literature.

Who is influential? This is the most fundamental question for interest group studies. Journalists, citizens, politicians, and other interest groups care about which groups succeed in setting the political agenda and influencing decisions. Defining and measuring influence is however among the most troublesome tasks for interest group researchers (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Dür, 2008; Beyers et al, 2008). The debate about how to define and measure influence has evolved in a substantial number of works and over several decades (Dahl, 1961; Truman, 1951; Riker, 1964; Dür, 2007; Leech, 2010). We will not delve deeper into this debate but rather focus on one of the avenues that have been pursued in the attempt to come closer to an answer of who is influential. The article discusses the potential in studying *interest group access* as a crucial step towards gaining influence.[1]

The major benefit of taking the step from influence to access is that access is observable. Interest group access leaves tracks, for example, in the form of e-mail correspondence, lists of participants in public boards and committees, appointments marked in calendars, and appearances in the news media. Some tracks are hard to find and study systematically. For instance, only few MPs are likely to agree to publish their personal calendars, and if they do, they are likely to censor the appointments in these calendars. Other tracks, such as media appearances and board memberships, are more easily available and allow us to compare groups' success in gaining access and potentially influencing public policy. Further, even in the absence of observable tracks, information derived from interest groups or public officials about access can be regarded as more reliable than information about influence. Hence, by conceptually moving from influence to access, we enable systematic empirical comparisons of group importance across a large number of groups, policy areas, lobbying venues, and countries.

We propose to define access as present when a group has *entered a political arena* (parliament, administration, or media) *passing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers* (politicians, civil servants, or journalists). This implies that for access to be present, interest groups need to seek it, and relevant gatekeepers need to allow it. This definition differentiates access from group strategies since access does not depend solely on group actions but also on gatekeepers. Access is also conceptually different from influence because access only entails being present and does not specify any

requirements of groups being listened to or able to change the attitudes of the decision-makers they gain access to.

Still, in order to be influential, it is helpful to be the group that gains access and advocates for its preferences rather than being excluded (Eising, 2007a; Hansen, 1991; Bouwen, 2004a; Binderkrantz, Christiansen and Pedersen, 2015). The underlying assumption in the access approach is thus that groups with political access are on average more likely to be influential than groups without such access. Studies of access therefore enable systematic comparison of bias in the set of groups being represented in relevant empirical settings.

In this paper, we review the literature on interest group access based on a systematic search of journal articles on the subject. Much work has been done on political access, but only relatively little attention has been devoted to the definition and operationalisation of access, which often rests on an intuitive understanding of what access implies rather than on explicit definitions. The study of access will therefore benefit from more conceptual clarification. We suggest a general definition of access, and based on data on Danish interest groups, we compare operationalisations of access derived from our proposed definition with some of the major alternatives found in the literature.

ACCESS IN THE STUDY OF INTEREST GROUP INFLUENCE

Interest group access as a proxy for influence has been studied for decades, and the approach has been applied in several countries and across different lobbying venues. Many studies draw on Truman's notion that interest groups cannot gain influence 'without access to one or more key points of decision in the government' (Truman, 1951: 264; Gullberg, 2011: 464; Hansen, 1991), and the influential distinction between insiders – those successful in gaining access – and outsiders – groups without access – stems from this general approach (Grant, 1978).

A search in the international database ProQuest in all relevant political science journals[2] for peer-reviewed articles in English on ['interest group*' OR 'interest organi?ation*' OR 'business interest' AND 'access'] resulted in 198 articles, of which a large share was related to market accessibility or accessibility of data. After removing these non-relevant articles, we ended up with 62 articles covering the years from 1967 to 2014 (articles listed in online appendix). This is a sample and

not the exhaustive set of articles on the subject, but we identified many of the most commonly cited articles and believe that the sample provides representative insights to the study of access. We coded all articles according to two main variables. 1) Does the article provide an explicit definition of access? We define an explicit definition as a conceptual clarification of what access entails (which is not the same as an explicit operationalisation of the theoretical concept). 2) What kind of data does the article use, if any? Here, we distinguish between quantitative data, qualitative data, and theoretical articles.

The review of the sampled articles reveals that interest group access is widely studied in the US (Andrews and Edwards, 2004; Austen-Smith, 1998; Ansolabehere et al, 2002; Cohen, 1970) and Europe (Beyers and Kerremans, 2012; De Bievre and Eckhardt, 2011; Bouwen, 2004b; Braun, 2013; Buksti, 1980), and increasingly also in other developed countries such as Israel (Yishai, 1998) and Japan (Tsujinaka and Pekkanen, 2007).

Our first important observation from the coding is that very few articles (10 out of 62) offer an explicit definition of access. The majority of the articles rest on an intuitive understanding of access as some sort of (direct) contact, which is different from approaching decision-makers indirectly. The ten explicit definitions that we do identify (Table 1) vary, which gives reason to discuss the options for more conceptual clarification. Most of them define access as meetings with decision-makers, most commonly bureaucrats or politicians. These meetings seem to be meant as physical meetings between group representatives and decision-makers. The second most common definition implies contact, which is a bit broader in the sense that contact does not need to be an actual meeting but could also be phone calls or e-mail correspondence. Finally, three of the definitions in Table 1 are related to exchanging or gathering information and gaining attention. These definitions all imply some sort of, not necessarily direct, contact between decision-makers and groups. For instance, according to the definition we suggest in Binderkrantz et al. (2015), a group can be said to have gained access to the media if a journalist writes about it without directly interviewing a group representative. The important defining characteristic is that the group gains attention from the gatekeepers in the relevant political arena.

TABLE 1

The lack of an explicit definition is problematic for comparing empirical results, evaluating measurement validity, and theorizing about how to gain or maintain access. If access is to be interpreted as a step towards influence, it must be placed somewhere between group strategies and group influence. Therefore, the tendency in the literature to connect inside/direct lobbying with access is problematic. Group strategies are determined by the groups themselves, possibly constrained by their resources. Access, on the other hand, is controlled by the relevant gatekeepers and can be given to the groups in exchange for the information, support, or ideas that the groups supply. Access may thus result from inside/direct as well as outside/indirect lobbying. For instance, politicians may invite groups to participate in a committee (access) because of the arguments and ideas they have put forward in public (outside lobbying).

Further, the concept of access is not only relevant for decision-making institutions but also for agenda-setting institutions such as the media. The question of control is critical in separating access from strategies. Access must be controlled by the relevant gatekeepers; otherwise, access is not a scarce good for the interest groups to compete over:

> Fundamental to our model is an assumption that the politician has control over which agents are allowed to present evidence. That is, the politician can avoid or ignore evidence held by an interest group without access. Without this assumption, there are no benefits to gaining access to the politician, and the game will resemble a standard game of strategic evidence disclosure (Cotton, 2012: 370).

It is crucial that access is defined and measured by something that is not controlled by the group, especially since access is often theorized as a product of an exchange relation between decision-makers and interest groups (Bouwen, 2004a; Chalmers, 2011; Eising, 2007a; Binderkrantz et al, 2015; Chalmers, 2013; Beyers and Kerremans, 2007). For access to be meaningfully theorized as a product of resource exchanges between interest groups and decision-makers, and therefore credibly interpreted as positively related to influence, we need to define access as being controlled by key political actors and exchanged for the resources that groups supply. A meeting with a decision-maker is definitely

controlled by the decision-maker himself, whereas contact – depending on the definition – may also contain contacts established solely by the group, such as sending a letter, calling an MP, or participating in a consultation, which may be ignored by the decision-maker.

The coding of the sample of articles also revealed that access is studied and operationalised in various ways ranging from documentary coding of representation over surveys among interest groups and officials to case studies of specific decision-making processes. This variation results in different types of data analysed for illuminating patterns and consequences of access. Table 2 shows that both qualitative and quantitative data are used to illuminate patterns of access with a slight overweight of quantitative data. Most qualitative studies are based on case studies that analyse documents as well as interviews, but they focus on a specific decision or group rather than paint a broader picture of access. Most quantitative studies are based on surveys and documentary searches. However, the lack of a clearly defined access concept also complicates the operationalisation.

TABLE 2

The validity of the information gathered can only be evaluated in the light of the definition of access. Regarding the use of documents, lists of meeting attendants will fit a definition of access entailing personal meetings, whereas overviews of campaign contributions will not. Mentioning of group names in newspapers fits the definition of access in the sense of winning the gatekeepers' attention but not necessarily in the sense of contact. Also, various door-pass registers may be used to identify the population of active interest groups as well as the population of groups gaining access. But if access is understood in a resource exchange perspective and thus controlled by the gatekeeper, it is crucial to know to what extent acceptance of the gatekeeper is needed in order to appear in the register.

Similar discussions may be unfolded in relation to the use of surveys and interviews of officials and interest groups. For instance, a number of studies ask interest groups how often they have been in contact with relevant decision-makers or institutions (Eising, 2007b; Dür and Mateo, 2012; Chalmers, 2013). This provides a valuable opportunity to study the frequency of contacts across different group types in different national settings. The results are interpreted as variation in access, which fits the

definition of access as contact but not necessarily as an actual meeting or a contact controlled by the relevant decision-maker. Contact may imply sending an e-mail or a letter, but it does not necessarily imply receiving an answer. Thus, as in any other empirical study, we need to evaluate the validity of the measures in relation to the conceptual definitions and interpret the results accordingly.

Access as a concept seems to rest on a rather intuitive understanding of some contacts between interest groups and decision-makers, but only few studies suggest an explicit definition or discuss the operationalisation of access in relation to the theoretical understanding of the concept. This leaves room for conceptual improvement. Even though moving from the concept of influence to the concept of access helps us in terms of identifying relevant observations for systematic empirical research, we have to avoid conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1970), which may lead to a mismatch between theoretical reasoning and research design and between conceptual definition and operationalisation.

We propose to restrict the definition of access to instances where: *a group has entered a political arena* (parliament, administration, or media) *passing a threshold controlled by relevant gate-keepers* (politicians, civil servants, or journalists). This definition implies that access is a result of groups seeking access by approaching the arena *and* gate-keepers allowing the groups access.[3] Centrally, the definition emphasises that access is controlled by gate-keepers and is thus suitable for evaluating often-held claims that access is a result of a resource exchange between groups and relevant decision-makers. Defined in this way, access is more encompassing than implied, for example, by a definition related to actual personal meetings, and only inside lobbying, but is narrower than a definition of access including any type of (direct) contact – also contacts with no response.

Crucially, the definition encompasses access of different types and to different political arenas. Access may thus be seen as a concept with different dimensions. Just as it is customary to distinguish between inside and outside lobbying, we may distinguish between access to inside and outside political arenas of relevance to groups seeking influence. Further distinctions may be made between formalised access, for example, in the shape of inclusion in public boards and committees, and more informal access types. Also, while access is often treated as a dichotomous concept – groups have either accessed a particular arena or not – much leverage can be gained from studying levels of access. For example, particularly prominent groups may be identified as being continually incorporated in

public boards and committees or in news stories. Systematic attention to different levels and dimensions of access is central for advancing our understanding of which groups matter most in politics.

COMPARING DIFFERENT MEASURES OF ACCESS TO POLITICAL ARENAS

In the following, we present a study in which we compare operationalisations of access to different arenas based on this definition with some of the main alternatives found in the literature. We focus on the consequences for conclusions about the representation of different types of interests since gauging the nature and extent of bias in group access is among the central objectives of many contributions to the interest group literature. We distinguish between measures capturing access in respect to parliament, the administration, and the media, and for each arena, compare a measure based on our proposed definition with alternative measures. In the comparison, we focus on the two most common approaches in large-scale mappings of interest group access (see Table 2 above): measures based on surveys among groups and measures based on document analyses. All types of data are collected for Danish interest groups in 2009/10.

Interest groups are defined as membership organisations seeking political influence without running for elections. We operate with seven main categories: 1) business groups that are associations of businesses and industries, 2) trade unions, 3) institutional groups that are associations of public institutions, such as schools, universities, and municipalities, 4) professional organisations that organise individuals in relation to their vocation, such as doctors, engineers, or history teachers, but differ from trade unions as they do not negotiate salaries and work conditions on behalf of their members, 5) identity organisations that organise people with similar life situations, such as students, elderly, women, or patients, 6) public interest groups that organise people for specific causes, such as environmental or humanitarian organisations, that do not primarily relate to the narrow self-interests of the members, and 7) leisure groups that concern activities related to the personal sphere, such as hobbies or religion. The population of Danish interest groups has been mapped based on updates of existing lists of groups, appearances of groups in the media, parliamentary committees, administrative consultations, administrative boards and committees, and internet searches. We end up with a

population of 2,543 groups in 2010. We administered a survey to every group on the list and received 1,645 answers (65 %). 1,109 groups reported to be politically active.

Based on our proposed definition, we measure access to the administration by seats in administrative boards and committees, which prepare, discuss, and administer legislation and administrative decisions and are therefore crucial for influencing public policy. Access to a board or committee requires an invitation, and access is thus controlled by gatekeepers in line with our conceptual definition. The weakness of the measure is that groups without seats may still have close links to civil servants from personal or professional networks, so not all groups with access to the Danish bureaucracy may show up in these data. In the Danish situation, case studies show that groups that were informally involved in decision-making also tended to be represented in more formal settings (Christiansen et al, 2004). A total of 1,964 administrative seats were registered. We do not use participation in administrative consultations as a measure of access, since in Denmark, this participation is open to any group and therefore not controlled by a gatekeeper.

We measure media access as appearance in newspaper articles. Two large national newspapers with opposite political leanings were selected for analysis (*Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*). The two papers have slightly different structures. In *Politiken,* politics, sports, and business are included in the first section. *Jyllands-Posten* has a separate business section. In order to ensure comparability across the two papers, we include the first section of *Politiken* and the first section plus the business section of *Jyllands-Posten*. Front pages were registered for a full year (from July 1 2009 to June 30 2010), and the remaining pages were registered for half a year. We did not include group advertisements in the papers since this would not fit our definition. By only including news articles, we are certain that the journalist or editor has been in control of the access. We also omitted negative appearances, such as descriptions of decreasing membership numbers or economic fraud since this cannot be seen as a group's successful entrance to an arena as stated in the definition. This exclusion is debatable, but since we think of access as an exchange relation where groups succeed in gaining access, we do not equal all types of appearances to access. We registered a total of 3,672 media appearances.

Finally, parliamentary access constitutes the greatest challenge. The most important target in parliament is MPs. Therefore, the optimal measure would be meetings between MPs and interest

groups, which would fit the definition perfectly. However, only 33 out of 179 MPs agreed to let us

look in their personal calendars during the three-month period that we asked for, so using only this

measure will not be representative. We therefore moved on to a more public source of groups

appearing in parliamentary committees. Groups may approach committees in deputations, which are

actual meetings with groups showing up in the committee for a 15-minute talk. The groups may also

send a letter. We included all deputations since groups would definitely have the attention of the

committee members at least for 15 minutes, and the number of deputations must be limited because of

time restrictions. However, we did not include *all* letters since these can be sent by any group at any

time and therefore constitute a contact without gatekeeper control. We only selected letters that

resulted in parliamentary reactions from MPs in the form of committee or personal parliamentary

questions. These letters do qualify as access since MPs are in control of which letters they react to, but

we may be moving further in the direction of studying influence rather than access. MP meetings,

deputations, and letters with responses combined summed up to 931 parliamentary access points.

These access measures are compared with two prominent alternatives found in previous studies

of access defined as contact. First, we apply a document-based approach including letters to

parliament and participation in government consultations. For this purpose, we have coded all letters

sent to parliamentary committees as well as all responses to consultations on bills in the parliamentary

year 2009/10. Second, we include survey-based measures according to which groups have been asked

to indicate their extent of contact with different actors. Specifically, groups were asked: 'How often

does your organisation have contacts with the following?' We include contact to government agencies,

individual MPs, and media/journalists in the relevant arena. A group is considered to have access if it

responded daily, at least once a week, or at least once a month.

Table 3 shows the pattern of access across the seven group types and three political arenas. For

each arena, the first column shows the distribution of access based on measures that operationalise our

proposed definition of access. For the administration and parliament, the second column reports

measures based on document analyses focusing on participation in government consultations and

sending letters to parliamentary committees. The last column for each arena includes survey-based

measures according to which groups have been asked to indicate how often they have been in contact

with government agencies, MPs, and media/reporters. For each indicator, the table displays the distribution of access across different group types.

TABLE 3

It is evident from the table that differences across arenas are larger than differences between measures focusing on the same arena. For example, business groups are clearly more dominant in the administration than in parliament and the media. On the contrary, public interest groups are more numerous among those who appear in the data sources focusing on the media and parliament. The relative similarity across different measures indicates that research results based on either of these measures are in fact rather robust (Binderkrantz et al, 2015).

While this could be taken as indicating that it may not matter that much after all how we define and operationalise interest group access, our inclination is to maintain the importance of distinguishing clearly between related, though distinct aspects of interest group politics. First, some differences do appear in the measures. For example, access to the administration and media appears even more disadvantageous for public interest groups when we look at counts of access points than it does when we focus on survey-based measures. Also the dominance of economic interests (business groups, trade unions, institutional groups, and professional groups) is much stronger when we look at actual access points rather than survey questions in the administration and the media. This difference may be overestimated by the phrasing and coding of the survey questions in which the frequency of access is not taken into account. Still, this indicates the insights that we obtain from using access points counts.

Second, and even more crucially, an important research question relates to addressing the causal relation between what interest groups do and the effects of group actions in terms of access and influence. An important precondition to such an endeavour is proper specifications of the involved concept.

MOVING THE ACCESS APPROACH FORWARD

The study of access is important for the interest group literature because it reveals which groups are on the radar of crucial political actors and therefore, all else equal, have better opportunities to influence public policy. So even though we know that access is no guarantee for influence (Dür and de Bièvre, 2007), we still come closer to identifying the set of groups most likely to be influential. For this reason, the access approach is also widely used in the study of interest groups.

Access has been studied in mainly three ways: 1) case studies of few decisions, 2) surveys of officials' and interest groups' contacts, and 3) searches for groups' appearances in official documents. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Case studies allow for inclusion of informal access points and possibly for linking access to influence, but they lack generalisability and the ability to map the set of groups gaining access across issues and time. Survey data rest on the assumption that every group and official thinks of contacts in the same way, is willing to report on its contacts, and is knowledgeable about their organisation's contacts in general. If these assumptions are not met, the data will be problematic. This paper has mainly focused on appearances in official documents. The strength of this method is that we obtain observable measures of contacts that are comparable across groups and independent of groups' and officials' perceptions, honesty, and knowledge. The weakness is that it forces us to only study access that leaves tracks, which often implies access through formal channels and only for a limited period of time because of the trouble in collecting these data.

This specific study has several strengths. First, it is based on an explicit definition of access that, most importantly, states that access is controlled by gatekeepers of different political arenas. This point is important for interpreting access as a scarce good available only to certain powerful or privileged groups. It is also important for theorising about access as a result of an exchange between groups and decision-makers that guides many hypotheses regarding which groups are most successful in gaining access. Finally, the explicit definition is important for evaluating the operationalisation and data used for studying access. As stated clearly above, our operationalisation is not unproblematic, but only by clearly defining the concept are we able to discuss the validity of the measures used. A second strength of this study is that it includes three political arenas, which makes it possible to show a more comprehensive picture of access in a political system.

However, the research of access also have important shortcomings and room for improvement. One specific concern for studies of multiple venues is to estimate the lobbying value of each venue. Even though our study finds that parliament and media allow access to more citizen groups, we do not know if this actually helps to level out the bias produced in the administration. Access points are not of equal value across political arenas and especially not across political systems. So an important improvement would be to begin weighting access points, for instance, according to the interest groups' preferences.

[1] Access is not necessary for being influential. Structural factors may put some actors in a powerful position from which they do not even have to lobby or struggle for access to be influential. The access approach does not include this type of influence. However, when studying interest groups, the most powerful actors in terms of resources and position in private or public positions tend to show up in sources of access, indicating that not many interest groups stay away from lobbying activities.

[2] Interest Groups & Advocacy, Journal of European Public Policy, Political Research Quarterly, Comparative Political Studies, European Union Politics, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Public Administration Review, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, International Studies Quarterly, Journal of Common Market Studies, West European Politics Science, Journal of Public Policy, American Politics Research, European Journal of Political Research, American Political Science Review, Business and Politics, International Social Science Journal, Journal of European Integration, The Journal of Politics, PS: Political Science & Politics, Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions, Political Studies and Public Administration.

[3] This also means that the definition excludes instances where a group is offered access but neglects the invitation. This may very well indicate that this group is powerful and important, but it will not count as an instance of access according to our definition.

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Table 1: Definitions of access

Source	Definition	Key aspect
Orman, 1988: 787	'Institutionalised meetings with presidency staff and direct meetings with the president, hence access must imply personal physical meetings'.	Meeting
Beyers, 2004: 213	'I define access as the exchange of policy-relevant information with public officials through formal or informal networks'.	Information networks
Brunell, 2005: 682	'However, the common wisdom with respect to the motivation for giving and the patterns of donations revolves around access--which is to say that interest groups are motivated to donate money in order to buy the ability to meet and talk to the MC or a staffer about policies that concern the group'.	Meeting
Eising, 2007a: 386 and Eising, 2007b: 331	'I define access as the frequency of contacts between interest organisations and EU institutions. These contacts range from informal bilateral meetings with EU officials and politicians to institutionalised committee proceedings'.	Contact meeting
Reenock and Gerber, 2008: 424	'We use a definition of access that concentrates on a group's ''direct and regular contact'' with members of the bureaucracy'.	Contact
Gullberg, 2011: 469	'Access is the ability interest groups have to reach decision-makers, to get information about the policy-making process, and to acquire the relevant documents'.	Information
Cotton, 2012: 372	'[…] if the politician grants it "access"; that is, if the politician or her staff meet with the interest group and reviews the merits of its case'.	Meeting
Dür and Mateo, 2013: 660	'Some mainly try to gain access (i.e., have direct contact with decision makers)'.	Contact
Binderkrantz et al., 2015: 9	'The concept of access implies that groups have successfully entered the relevant political arena and gained the attention of bureaucrats, politicians, or the media'.	Attention

Table 2: Overview of used methods and data in sample of articles

	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative and quantitative	No systematic data	Total
Case study of group or decision(s)	14				14 (23 %)
Survey among groups		13	2		15 (24 %)
Survey among officials		4	1		5 (8 %)
Survey among groups and officials	1	1	1		3 (5 %)
Surveys among citizens		1			1 (2 %)
Documents[1]	1	13			14 (23 %)
Other[2]	1			9	10 (16 %)
Total	17 (27 %)	32 (52 %)	4 (6 %)	9 (15 %)	62 (100 %)

[1]Documents cover registers of lobbyists, letters, news articles, campaign contribution documents, and the like to count access points.

[2]Others cover (game) theoretical articles, literature reviews, and more anecdotal empirical evidence.

Table 3: Comparing different measures of access

	Administration			Parliament			Media	
	Seats in boards	Participation in consultations	Contact survey question	Reactions and meetings	Sending letters to committees	Contact survey question	Mentioning in articles	Contact survey question
Business groups	40.9	41.0	34.1	26.3	24.1	26.4	31.4	27.9
Trade unions	25.2	20.4	18.2	23.7	15.8	19.7	29.8	15.8
Institutional groups	13.7	14.9	11.2	7.1	8.4	9.7	12.0	7.1
Professional groups	4.2	2.4	6.3	2.1	2.1	1.8	1.6	5.2
Identity groups	4.3	9.9	10.7	18.4	20.6	17.3	9.1	14.0
Public interest groups	8.6	7.8	13.3	17.8	23.3	17.3	13.7	18.1
Leisure groups	3.0	3.7	6.1	4.5	5.6	7.9	2.4	11.8
Total no. of access points	1,964	1,692	428	931	1,071	330	3,672	634