

Summary report

Securing the future

of public sport and leisure services

A report on behalf of APSE, the LGA and CLOA



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**A report on behalf of Association for Public Service
Excellence, Local Government Association and Chief Cultural
and Leisure Officers Association**



APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK. Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority front line services, hosting a network for front line service providers in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, housing and building maintenance.



The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national membership body for local authorities. Our membership comprises 328 of the 333 councils in England and includes district, county, metropolitan and unitary authorities, London boroughs and the City of London Corporation. The 22 Welsh unitary councils are in membership via the Welsh Local Government Association.

We are a politically-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems. We work on behalf of our member councils to support, promote and improve local government through our improvement offer.



The Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) is the professional association for strategic leaders managing public sector Culture, Arts, Heritage, Tourism, Libraries, Parks, Sport and Leisure services. The Association is not only important in its own right, but acts as the hub for many other influential professional organisations working in the leisure and cultural industry. It provides a unique vehicle for cross-fertilisation of ideas towards common goals and plays an important part in delivering our vision – that every locality has a thriving, high quality and distinctive cultural and leisure offer.

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1. Introduction

Our nation is facing significant health challenges. Preventable yet life-changing illnesses like obesity and diabetes are soaring in number, yet the recent pandemic has undermined participation in the most effective preventative measure – being active.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for public sport and leisure services. The loss of income due to long periods of closure combined with high monthly maintenance costs has significantly affected the viability of the sector, coupled with the more fundamental and ingrained systemic issues already at play, which has seen the social and health outcomes that public sports and leisure services provide negatively affected by the need to reduce subsidy over the last decade, as a result of the financial pressures councils have faced

Councils have supported their leisure providers throughout the pandemic, both in terms of their in-house teams, and externally commissioned providers, whilst providers have had to make full use of their financial reserves. However, because many providers operate on low profit margins or are constituted as trusts or charities, they have been unable to secure Government support beyond the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) and the National Leisure Recovery Fund (NLRG) resulting in a projected **revenue loss of £411m for district councils alone¹, rising to around £600m when unitary councils and metropolitan boroughs are included.**

These acute challenges have put public sport and leisure services under the spotlight and have led to a renewed recognition of the vital contribution they make to communities. Although the word 'leisure' can conjure up images of relaxation and optional activities, public sports and leisure services are in fact a service that fundamentally supports the health of the nation, enabling people to live longer, prevent or manage health conditions, and boost mental health. The more deprived an area is the more dependent the community are on public sports and leisure provision.

We are also facing a climate emergency. With **leisure facilities producing between 10-40 per cent of district and unitary councils' direct carbon emissions**, upgrading the leisure estate will be crucial to achieving net zero targets. Physical activity services also have a key role to play in helping people change behaviours and feel confident enough and fit enough to undertake the switch from cars to cycling, walking and running to their destinations.

Our research has found that **nearly two thirds of the leisure estate is ageing and past its replacement date**, with a number of facilities having to be closed for urgent structural repairs. Many will not reopen. There is therefore a significant opportunity at this point in time to rethink about what our communities will need from our facilities and services in the future, and design new, more efficient and impactful solutions to help our communities to be active and stay healthier for longer. **Councils are ambitious to do more to maximise the benefits of public sport and leisure services for their residents and their contribution towards wider objectives**, such as reducing the burden on the NHS and social care, lowering levels of obesity and cutting carbon emissions. This transformation will only happen if there is leadership and investment from Government and councils to level up communities.

Despite the challenge of finances and an ageing estate, major opportunities exist. The new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities provides a very significant opportunity to integrate leisure provision within the health system. Respondents were clear that with the right leadership, partnerships, coordination and investment, public sport and leisure services can deliver significantly more social, economic and environmental benefits for the whole of society and support long term recovery from COVID-19. This will require a fundamental change of direction in how public sport and leisure services are valued, alongside changes to finances, and a much greater recognition of the value and contribution of public sport and leisure services, to public health, social value and the wellbeing of communities.

¹ District Councils Network: <https://districtcouncils.info/press-releases/one-in-three-councils-expect-to-be-forced-to-close-leisure-centres-forever-new-survey/>

It is in this context that the **Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)**, **Local Government Association (LGA)** and **Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA)** consulted with over 250 councils and a wide range of stakeholders to seek their views on what needs to change so that public sport and leisure services can operate sustainably and deliver the best outcomes for communities. This summary therefore provides an outline of the key issues and recommendations, whilst the full report provides greater detail, further case studies and survey findings.

2. The contribution of public sport and leisure services

Council sport and leisure services provide a unique offer. As community leaders of place, they offer affordable, universal and targeted services, and activities, that are simply not provided for elsewhere at such scale. Councils are currently the biggest national public spender on sport, leisure, parks and green spaces. Public sport and leisure is also increasingly combined with other core council services such as libraries, social care, culture, and community hub services. Underlining the inter-dependencies within the sports system, provision also includes specialist support for local sports clubs and performance sport, especially swimming and diving but also athletics, tennis, and rugby to name just three. Without Council support, these activities would be severely impacted. In short, public sport and leisure services are not the same as those offered by private providers but are in fact a unique part of the local 'eco-system' of physical activity, through sport and leisure services, to the whole of the community.

We all recognise that local authorities take care of their residents from the cradle to grave through the services they provide. From antenatal and new born visits provided by health workers, to the provision of housing, clean environments, public health, older care services or the maintenance of cemeteries and crematoria, our lives are affected by councils in many ways. Public sport and leisure services are no exception: whilst they are discretionary services, councils have been playing a critical role in providing the infrastructure and promoting health and wellbeing to the masses since the mid-1800s through to the present day, a role that is brought into even greater focus with the huge health inequalities presenting themselves in our post COVID-19 world.

Public sport and leisure services are a part of the social infrastructure of the nation. They support work to tackle loneliness and health inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. They bring communities together, promote healthier lifestyles and contribute a wealth of social value such as reducing crime and improving educational attainment. They are relied upon by everyone, from people who want to be more active, to grassroots clubs and elite athletes training to compete nationally and internationally including our future Olympians and Paralympians. Significantly, public sport and leisure services are often the only choice for people living in deprived areas, and our research recognises that much more should and can be done to reach more diverse communities and help to address inequalities in access. As deprived communities typically suffer from poorer health and lower life expectancy rates, the provision of affordable public leisure facilities is essential for levelling up and reducing growing health inequalities. In the words of Levelling Up Adviser Neil O'Brien,² *"it's very difficult to have a successful economy if lots of people are off sick."*

The NHS relies on leisure facilities to provide exercise on referral schemes, social prescribing activities and rehabilitation services, with 66 per cent of cancer rehabilitation taking place in leisure facilities³. Research by the District Councils Network demonstrates that 94 per cent of councils leisure centres had been utilised in schemes to tackle health inequalities over the last 5 years. 84 per cent confirmed that their leisure centres had been utilised in projects aimed at 'hard to reach' community members over the last 5 years and 79 per cent of leisure centres are used in social prescribing programmes. Voluntary groups like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) rely on public swimming pools to train their lifeguards during the winter months⁴ and 72 per cent of primary schools rely on publicly provided pools to deliver their statutory responsibility for children to learn to swim.⁵ The social value created from participation in leisure centres totalled almost £262 million in May-June 2019. A further £20bn of value came from stronger and safer communities.

2 https://drive.google.com/file/d/10WZxowWhKfRbLYftpun3_hRtQWAGOkR/view

3 <https://www.ukactive.com/news/threat-to-gyms-and-leisure-facilities-could-leave-covid-patients-without-rehab-and-further-damage-our-nations-health/>

4 https://www.swimming.org/assets/Swim_England_Curriculum_Swimming_and_Water_Safety_Review_Group_Report_2017.pdf

5 https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MC_SRA_04_Social-Value_Issued.pdf

Further insight from the Moving Communities platform⁶ demonstrates the significance of public leisure centres in the activity habits of customers' lives, with 86 per cent of people saying they preferred exercising there compared to a more informal environment, and 77 per cent saying they felt the staff at the centre gave them the guidance they needed to be more active.

Whilst this report recognises that public sports and leisure services go beyond the bricks and mortar which often house them, embracing community development and outreach work, many communities are at risk of losing their sport and leisure infrastructure and the benefits it brings. Even before the pandemic, the sector was facing huge challenges⁷ with Sport England estimating⁸ 63 per cent of main sports halls and 60 per cent of swimming pools are past their expected lifespans or overdue refurbishment and Swim England forecasting a 40 per cent reduction in the number of public pools available. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee's recent 'Sport in our communities' report⁹ highlighted that grassroots clubs are already struggling to afford and secure access to space in existing facilities. A series of closures of public leisure facilities will make it even harder for grassroots clubs.

Whilst these are all serious challenges, so too is there a real opportunity to transform the way these services and facilities are designed, provided and delivered. Councils and partners can build them into the new Integrated Care Systems (ICS), connect them to active travel routes and '20 minute communities'¹⁰, and create community hubs by co-locating with wider wellbeing services like GP surgeries, care homes, libraries, and beauty salons. Given that the average lifespan of a leisure facility is 25 years, it is vital that we take a thoughtful, coordinated approach as we rebuild from the pandemic to create the facilities communities need in the long-term, rather than piecemeal closures, refurbishment and replacement which is often focused on the physical asset rather than the combination of both quality infrastructure alongside the wider integration of public sport and leisure services as a conduit to wider public policy outcomes.

However, the sector's finances remain on a knife edge as it struggles to bounce back from the pandemic, which exacerbated the already systemic problems in financing public sport and leisure services. Due to pandemic regulations the closure of services has meant a loss of income, reduced operating capacity because of social distancing measures, and yet both in-house and commissioned providers have continued to accrue high monthly maintenance costs. Councils have supported their leisure providers with emergency funding, as has the Government, for example through the £100 million NLRF, but because of their status as trusts or charities, providers have struggled to secure additional support beyond the Job Retention Scheme, otherwise known as Furlough.

This has been compounded by reductions in membership by as much as 50 per cent in some areas. Even where visits have returned to between 70-80% of pre-COVID numbers this still creates significant losses, which undermines not only its operational viability but the ability to invest long-term in extending its reach. Initial anecdotal evidence suggests that, there are significant variations in the profile of those returning to use the service including, older people, children and those with disabilities, who are already within the 'harder to reach' groups, and appear to be slower in making a return to physical activity.

6 https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Moving-Communities-In-Focus_Issue-2_240621.pdf <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-20-minute-neighbourhood>

7 **COVID-19 revealed** that many leisure providers which are constituted as trusts or charities had low levels of reserves due to low margin contracts. Their status left many providers unable to access sales fees and charges scheme or loans available to commercial operators. In some areas relationships between council and provider are contractual rather than strategic. <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Options%20for%20councils%20in%20supporting%20leisure%20providers%20through%20COVID-19%20WEB.pdf>

8 <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/nearly-two-thirds-leisure-centres-need-urgent-investment>

9 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmcmds/45/4502.htm>

10 The idea of '20 minute neighbourhoods' (sometimes known by other names such as '15 minute cities') has grown in interest as the COVID-19 lockdowns highlighted the importance of the liveability of neighbourhoods, with people spending more time locally, working at home if possible, using local public green spaces, cycling and walking instead of using cars and connecting with neighbours. It is already being implemented in places such as Melbourne and Paris. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-20-minute-neighbourhood>

These acute challenges have put leisure services under the spotlight, prompting a renewed recognition by the sector of public sport and leisure services' contribution to communities. This is in two specific ways; one is the sector's ability to reach, at a universal level, more people who need those services the most. The second is the ability of these services to be commissioned to deliver targeted support to people with specific needs.

There are a number of common themes and priorities emerging from national strategies and from leading voices about future direction of travel, where the public sport and leisure sector can demonstrate its role within the wider physical activity eco-system. These themes are drawn from emerging strategies and reports such as Sport England's new strategy "Uniting the movement" and the outcomes of work looking into the best ways to get people active within localities via local delivery pilots (Sport England "People and Places"). They are also drawn from the Marmot report whereby adopting the principles of Universal Proportionalism can help extend the reach of services to those most in need of support, especially relevant in a post COVID-19 world.

3. Our research

Our research shows that councils are unanimous in their desire to provide leisure services, even in the face of current difficulties and despite not being required to legally do so. **There is strong view from councils and leisure providers (97 per cent) that these services could be commissioned to do more by achieving greater alignment with wider stakeholders.** The pandemic has highlighted that many new opportunities exist to engage with communities, such as building on the connections made with community leaders and those who have traditionally been underrepresented in councils' public participation, better and more creative opportunities to be active in parks and green spaces and capitalising on the new audience they attracted during periods of lockdown when they became lifelines for local communities. Online exercise and fitness classes present a chance to reach new audiences, but they also bring the risk of digital exclusion as well as a potential knowledge and skills deficit in the current workforce: as ever there is a balance to be struck.

Respondents were clear that with the right leadership and investment, public sport and leisure services can deliver significantly more social, economic and environmental benefits for the whole of society and support long term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. While some investment is needed, particularly to repair the leisure estate and reduce carbon emissions, there is also much that can be achieved through leadership, partnership working and coordination roles. The new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and health and social care reforms¹¹, implementation of Sport England's strategy 'Uniting the Movement',¹² refresh of the DCMS, 'Sporting Future' strategy and the Government's obesity¹³ strategy provide a very significant opportunity to integrate sport and leisure services with the health and place-based outcomes and wider policy objectives.

This summary report focuses on the key recommendations to local and central Government and their partners as they think about the future design, delivery and objectives of their public leisure services. Whilst some changes may require a longer-term invest-to-save approach, many are also of no-cost or cost-neutral. Where investment is required, this will save money in the long term by reducing energy usage or demand for costly NHS operations or social care support. It is supported by a longer document which outlines the unique contribution that public leisure makes to communities; stepping in where the private sector cannot afford to operate, and delivering critical public policy objectives like social prescribing, supporting community and grassroots sport, and drowning prevention. It provides practical insights for those tasked with implementing the recommendations.

By adopting these measures, Government(s) and councils can dramatically improve the fortunes and health of their local communities, make a significant contribution towards meeting climate change targets, and lay the foundations for a successful sporting future for the nation.

As the Prime Minister said in his landmark speech on levelling up:

"...we won't level up when so many people are sick, or off work because they are stressed, or because they suffer from obesity or problems with their mental health and that's why we are tackling the problems of junk food and rewarding exercise..."

Boris Johnson, Prime Minister, 15 July 2021

11 <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Options%20for%20councils%20in%20supporting%20leisure%20providers%20through%20COVID-19%20WEB.pdf>

12 <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3022>

13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sporting-future-a-new-strategy-for-an-active-nation>

South Kesteven District Council

has put in place a wholly-owned council company called LeisureSK Ltd to manage their leisure services¹. Prior to the pandemic the council intended to procure a new contract arrangement but this became unviable as the council were providing significant financial support to their contractor and a procurement during the pandemic was not likely to produce a beneficial result.

The new arrangement has provided the council with time to complete leisure feasibility work, and to develop an investment plan and timeline to facilitate the necessary improvements to its four leisure facilities across the district. The ambition is for the leisure centres to be community hubs providing services such as physiotherapy, GP referrals, stop smoking programmes, and the provision of activities in rural communities through outreach programmes run by the centres in its market towns.²

1 <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/south-kesteven-district-council-transfer-leisure-service-council>

2 <http://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=14521>

4. Key findings and recommendations

Our research identified the following key findings:

- That fundamental systemic issues with the funding of public sector sports and leisure provision have been building over the past decade and have been hugely exacerbated as a result of COVID-19.
- Councils play a central leadership role in creating active places, connecting diverse Government objectives through planning, active travel schemes, parks and playground provision, and their leisure facilities.
- Public sport and leisure services are unique for their reach and support for communities, providing lifelong opportunities for all to be active, especially in some of the most deprived communities.
- Public sport and leisure services are integral to COVID-19 recovery supporting communities to recover and helping relieve pressures on NHS and social care services.
- Community sport and physical activity development is essential in expanding the reach of services and helping to address health inequalities.
- Public sport and leisure services are under immediate risk of operational failure and face critical long-term damage without immediate further support.
- The public provision of swimming facilities and the need to reach the levels of swimming attainment in the national curriculum cannot be fulfilled by private operators. It is essential for ensuring tens of thousands of primary school children, particularly in more deprived areas, learn important water safety skills and learn to swim each year.
- Ageing leisure assets make a significant contribution to carbon emissions, and investment in decarbonising assets can help to meet net-zero targets and reduce running costs in the longer term.
- The voice of the public sport and leisure sector is fragmented, which has weakened its ability to influence at local and national level.
- Investment in leadership and skills development is required across leisure and health partners to develop the services needed by communities in the future, support collaboration and drive further integration of services.

Leaders of public sport and leisure services are keen to expand on their existing contributions and to work collaboratively with partners such as the NHS and public health to further enhance the sector's preventative offer for mental and physical health. Collectively, our respondents identified the following ambitions for their services:

- Working to integrate more closely with health systems, including the new Integrated Care Systems and public health teams, delivering increased social prescribing opportunities, and GP referral programmes, building on existing work and wider community development programmes.
- Ensuring that new contracts build in additional social value to communities, whether through apprenticeships, outreach and activities targeted at less active groups, or purchasing from local businesses.
- Strategically planning sports and leisure services including facilities, of the future, including co-location with other services and their role in regeneration of high streets and neighbourhoods.

To do this effectively, two key contributions are needed from Government:

1. The new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities should take responsibility for embedding the strategic role of public leisure facilities within health systems and pathways, coordinating with DCMS, MHCLG and local government within England. All nations should consider how best to coordinate public sport and leisure provision across differing departments of Government

2. A £1 billion capital investment into the leisure estate based on established design plans would help to create hundreds of construction jobs, improve efficiency, reduce climate emissions and boost usage. Longer term, it would create new job opportunities and apprenticeships in areas of the sport and leisure industry typically taken by young people.
3. In light of the discussions with our member councils, stakeholder groups and consultation responses, the LGA, CLOA and APSE have identified the following seven recommendations at a national or collective level for stabilising the public leisure sector and enabling it to play a full role in the levelling up of communities and the recovery from COVID-19.

Our seven recommendations are:

1. DCMS should establish a programme for public sport and leisure services equivalent to its 'Valuing culture and heritage assets capital: a framework towards informing decision making' programme. The new programme should make statistics and evidence publicly available to aid the articulation of the value of public sport and leisure services locally and nationally in line with Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) Green Book.
2. DCMS and MHCLG should work in partnership with local government to build a robust case for the sustainable investment in public sport and leisure services, to be put forward to HMT for the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021. It should recognise the wider policy objectives that these services contribute to, and be supported by the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Department for Education (DfE) and NHS England in recognition of the critical role public sport and leisure services play in addressing their objectives.
3. The DfE should work with Government departments and councils to map the provision of swimming facilities and levels of curriculum attainment, investing to address gaps or future gaps in the system and making targeted support available to enable schools to invest in learn to swim and swim safety where the system is currently failing.
4. Councils should consider what social value outcomes they want to achieve through public sport and leisure services and design services accordingly, including activities such as outreach work to support those who are most vulnerable. These objectives must also be fully embedded into procurement activity and contract management processes.
5. Sport England (and other devolved administrations and sports councils), UK Active and Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) should work together, with other key partners, to provide professional development opportunities that meet the future skills needs in a post-COVID-19 world. This should consider what is needed to tackle inequalities in access, including the implications of digital inequalities.
6. Investment should be made available to enable relevant bodies across the UK such as Sport England, the LGA, CLOA and APSE alongside other UK administrative bodies for sport and leisure to provide leadership development for portfolio holders and officers at a strategic and democratic governance level. A key element of the programme should be supporting elected members and officers to make the linkages with the wider system, including health systems.
7. The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) should enhance its capacity, increase its visibility and engagement with the Government, and accelerate its work.

Further information on these recommendations can be found in our longer report

5. Defining public sport and leisure provision

Public sport and leisure services provide a unique offer, one that offers 'cradle to grave' provision that is affordable, accessible and universally available to all but with targeted services for those who need it. The range and depth of provision at all stages of life is what makes public leisure unique: pre-natal swim classes, creche facilities, national curriculum swimming lessons for primary school children, school holiday clubs, teenage activities, multi-sports clubs, fitness and wellbeing classes for older people, exercise programmes for individuals with long term health conditions such as cardiac diseases or type 2 diabetes and support for pre and post rehabilitation cancer treatment patients. These services are often outside the scope of what a commercial gym would wish to offer.

Public sport and leisure services do not target people simply for membership for commercial purpose but instead have a unique role in engaging communities to be active, healthy and to connect communities and improve wellbeing. This enables them to offer discounted or free access to those members of the community who may not otherwise be able to afford access to activities, whether the unemployed, families on low incomes, veterans, or disabled residents. They also offer outreach and wraparound services, going out to engage communities in the places that feel comfortable for them to be active.

Put simply public sport and leisure services and activities are those which may not otherwise be commercially viable for other providers, who by necessity operate on market-based models and profit margins. Public sport and leisure services provide the facilities, pitches and parks that support and are relied upon by grassroots clubs, elite athletes, schools, the NHS, and performance sports such as swimming and diving, athletics, tennis, and rugby to name just a few. Alongside this they also provide community sports and physical activity development, and outreach services, which are not simply offered through facility-based services, but out in, and crucially at, a community level.

Without the support of councils these sports and wider activities could not survive in a purely commercial sport and leisure marketplace.

Councils in England are currently the biggest spender on sport, leisure, parks and green spaces, **spending £1.1 billion per year**. They are responsible for:

27,000 parks and green spaces

2,727 leisure centres

33 per cent of all swimming pools – which provide the majority of publicly accessible water space

31 per cent of grass pitches

20 per cent of all health and fitness facilities

13 per cent of sports halls

66 per cent of cancer pre and post rehabilitation services – of which 69 per cent is funded by councils and the voluntary community sector

6. The contribution of public sport and leisure services

Sport and leisure services contribute to a range of outcomes beyond the immediate benefits of increased physical activity and improving health and wellbeing. These include community pride and cohesion, tackling health inequalities and reducing the burden on the NHS and social care, creating strong local economies and offering the potential to meet net zero targets through the decarbonisation of the leisure estate.

Improving the public's health and wellbeing

Publicly run sport and leisure services play a crucial role in supporting health and mental wellbeing. Independent research on the social and economic value of sport undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University estimates that community sport and activity generate £85.5 billion of social and economic value in England.¹⁴ This equates to a return on investment of **£3.91** for every **£1** spent.

Regular physical activity is shown to reduce the risk of serious illness and disease, particularly amongst those most exposed to health inequalities. It reduces the risk by up to the following figures¹⁵:

- Dementia 35 per cent
- Cardiovascular disease 35 per cent
- Type 2 Diabetes 40 per cent
- Colon Cancer 30 per cent
- Breast cancer 20 per cent
- Hip Fractures 68 per cent
- Depression 20 per cent

By continuing investment in public sport and leisure services we can reduce the burden on key public services with social returns providing an estimated value of **£9.5 billion** from improvements in our nation's health and **£42 billion** achieved through improved mental wellbeing.¹⁶ Even realising a fraction of this would be a significant investment in the nation's wellbeing.

Professor Whitty standing on the steps of Number 10 and saying that exercise and activity is the most effective protective measure people can take to build resilience to COVID-19 was a powerful statement, and he is right that we mustn't lose sight of this as we look to build back better.¹⁷

Reducing the burden on the NHS and social care

Investing in public sport and leisure services is an investment in ill-health prevention. This will be key to relieving pressure on the NHS and social care services as the UK emerges from the pandemic. Our report recognises that even greater levels of support may also be needed at a community level to cope with the impact of long-COVID which is reported to affect some **376,000** people according to ONS data, and a further **5.3 million** people with deteriorating health conditions as a result of the expansion of NHS waiting lists¹⁸ due to pressure on elective surgery and treatment backlogs. The findings also demonstrate how physical activity plays an important role in preventing a number of serious physical

14 <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-09/Social%20and%20economic%20value%20of%20sport%20and%20physical%20activity%20-%20summary.pdf?VersionId=1fr7FqnmAz.8U3LLQu14rb1yIKL4SUJ7>

15 <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-09/Social%20return%20on%20investment.pdf?VersionId=5BgvLn09jwpTesBJ4BXhVfRhV4TYgm9E>

16 [\h">https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-09/Social%20and%20economic%20value%20of%20sport%20and%20physical%20activity%20-%20summary.pdf?VersionId=1fr7FqnmAz.8U3LLQu14rb1yIKL4SUJ7"\h](https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-09/Social%20and%20economic%20value%20of%20sport%20and%20physical%20activity%20-%20summary.pdf?VersionId=1fr7FqnmAz.8U3LLQu14rb1yIKL4SUJ7)

17 <https://www.ukactive.com/news/professor-chris-whitty-calls-for-physical-activity-to-play-key-role-in-nations-recovery-and-future/>" \h

18 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/May21-RTT-SPN-publication-69343.pdf>

and mental health conditions, with the research showing this had a value of £9.5bn. Of this amount, £5.2bn was in healthcare savings, while £1.7bn was in social care savings

Even prior to the pandemic the number of obese adults and children in the UK was at crisis point. In 2018, 63 per cent of adults in England were overweight and of these half were classified as obese and 20 per cent of year 6 children were classified as obese. Obesity is a contributory factor to the development of long-term conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some cancers and respiratory disease. Severe obesity can also result in physical and social difficulties which impact on social care.

Increasing obesity prevalence along with the growing needs of an ageing population present significant challenges and cost implications to both the health and social care systems.^{19 20}The cost to the NHS for treating obesity-related ill health is forecast to rise to £9.7 billion per year by 2050. Councils are crucial partners in responding to the obesity crisis and delivering the Government's obesity strategy. Many councils already have exercise referral programmes in place but this is not a consistent picture across the country. Tackling obesity will require a whole system approach and adequate resourcing to ensure preventative services are available to meet local need. The new ICS also offer significant potential to connect leisure into healthcare systems and an opportunity to rethink and redesign how and where services are delivered.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

has developed an innovative partnership between local GPs and its leisure centres to make the most of social prescribing opportunities and to deliver savings to the NHS.¹

The council has designed an IT system that allows GPs to book patients directly on to the exercise on-referral scheme and onto its award-winning Live Well programme which helps to combat obesity. Half of people completing the programme have achieved at least a 5 per cent weight loss. This has drastically reduced the number of bariatric surgery operations from 100 to 20 pa in the area in 8 years (the most expensive type of operation for the NHS), this was double the national average but is now half of the national average and has saved the NHS £2.5m in the process.

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Laurie%20Fergusson%20PP.pdf>

During the pandemic leisure centres specifically were seen as essential community hubs. There are now many examples of how they are integrated with other services such as community contact centres, libraries, adult social care day care and GP surgeries.

Nottingham Leisure Services

created a community hub after it closed on 18th March 2020 due to the introduction of COVID-19 national lockdown measures.¹ Large numbers of staff were unable to continue in their roles as pool attendants and gym instructors and thousands of members were unable to access fitness services and buildings became empty.

In response to the crisis the leisure service repurposed Harvey Hadden Sport Village as a food and PPE distribution depot, transformed the tennis centre into a customer contact centre for the Shielding programme, redeployed staff to critical frontline council services and changed its existing fitness offer to a digital fitness offer - all while planning to reopen safely for the public when restrictions eased.

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/nottingham-leisure-services-creating-community-hub>

¹⁹ <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/Tackling%20obesity.pdf> \h

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-obesity-government-strategy>

7. Tackling inequalities and levelling up provision across the country

The COVID-19 crisis has further amplified health inequalities in our communities. Research by Public Health England showed that people of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Black Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50 per cent higher risk of death when compared to White British people.²¹ In part, this is because Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are likely to be at an increased risk of acquiring COVID-19 because they are more likely to live in urban areas, in overcrowded households, in deprived areas and have jobs that expose them to higher risk. They are also more likely to face additional barriers in accessing services because of cultural and language differences and have pre-existing co-morbidities leading to poorer health outcomes.

It is now well known that people with health conditions such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases and their underlying causes are associated with increased risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19. Public leisure and sport services have a key role to play in providing preventative services, reducing the number of long-term conditions and addressing inequalities.

Public sport and leisure services are critical to addressing inequalities because long-term evidence suggests people from lower socio-economic groups are twice as likely to be inactive than the more affluent. People who are on lower incomes or unemployed depend on affordable and/or subsidised public leisure provision when they are unable to afford the monthly membership fee of private sector gyms, especially in areas outside of core and key cities that are less well served by the private sector. This in turn restates the challenges of public sport and leisure services which encourages reliance upon income from fees and charges, which potentially risks excluding those very people it is intended to benefit.

Early data suggest fewer visits by women to leisure centres since reopening compared to men. This may be because group exercise programmes, which are traditionally more popular with women, and additional facilities such as creches have not fully returned overall and may take longer to return.

Research also shows that activity levels for Black and Asian adults has dropped by almost five per cent since November 2019 and both ethnic groups are 10-14 per cent less active than their White counterparts. Further analysis on the types of activities undertaken by different ethnic backgrounds demonstrates a higher representation from Asian and Black adults in the participation of cricket, basketball, badminton and football, as well as track & field, gymnastics and dance for Black adults. These facilities are most likely to be provided by public leisure services.

²¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf

8. Learning to swim

Public swimming pools are expensive to build and costly to run, and where private pools do exist, they are often inaccessible to the general public, being located within hotels, holiday resorts or requiring expensive memberships at private gyms. Councils are responsible for the majority of swimming facilities and losing public sector provision would decimate people's access to a healthy, positive, family activity that can equip them with life skills to prevent drowning. Swimming is also an essential low-impact activity for older residents and those with joint or mobility issues.

Swimming

is one of the most popular sports activities, with around 14 million people taking part each year (before COVID-19), but few private operators offer wet facilities because of the high running costs.

Analysis by Swim England has revealed that child swimming attainment levels in 15 of the 20 local authority areas that are the shortest on water space are below the national average, and a recent report by Swim England and the APPG for Swimming forecast that the number of children leaving primary school able to meet the statutory requirement to swim 25m unaided and perform self-rescue will drop to just 43 per cent by 2025/26 due to the impact of missed lessons during the pandemic. This is forecast to have the greatest impact¹ on children from Black, Asian and other diverse ethnic communities (with 33 per cent able to swim 25m compared to 49 per cent of White British children in year 7) and children in the most deprived areas of England hit the hardest with only 35 per cent of children in year 7 in the most deprived areas of England forecast to be able to swim 25 metres compared to 77 per cent children in year 7 living in the least deprived areas).

¹ <https://www.swimming.org/library/46/5146>

9. Contributing to net zero targets

Councils report that leisure facilities such as swimming pools and ice rinks are among the most energy intensive parts of their estate. For some councils, their leisure facilities account for over 40 per cent of their direct carbon emissions making these facilities a priority for decarbonisation programmes. However, at the same time, the ageing and old-fashioned design of many of these facilities means that simple retrofitting is often not the best solution. Many need a complete redesign or replacement if they are to meet the future needs of their communities.

A twin track approach is therefore needed: using existing decarbonisation schemes to update and retrofit leisure facilities less than halfway through their lifespan, but ensuring that dedicated investment is provided to combine energy efficiency with better designed facilities.

Exeter City Council

is due to open one of the world's most energy efficient leisure centres in 2021. St Sidwell's Place is the first leisure centre in the UK to be built to the super energy efficient Passivhaus standard. Replacing the more than 50 year old Pyramids swimming pool, it is expected to save up to 70 per cent on annual energy costs, use 50 per cent less water, significantly reduce running costs and need lower maintenance costs. It has also been designed to withstand predicted changes in climate conditions up to 2080.

It is located in the heart of the city and plays a key part in wider council regeneration plans, with 500,000 visitors predicted to visit St Sidwell's Place annually.¹

Over 1,000 people have helped to design, construct and deliver the build. It has created eight jobs for apprentices, 15 jobs for new entrants and one graduate job. Thirteen qualifications have been gained and 35 work placements have been created. Twenty-seven of the recipients were in education (22 T Level students and five school placements) and eight not in education. In addition, there have been over 1,000 Passivhaus Passport completions, with the workforce upskilled on environmentally friendly building practices to support its implementation in future builds. The social impact generated through skills and employment has been £340,320.

¹ <https://buildinggreaterexeter.co.uk/careers-in-construction-st-sidwells-point>

10. What are the challenges and risks facing public sport and leisure services?

In spite of their ability to support public health and wellbeing, tackle health inequalities, address the 'levelling up' agenda and contribute to greener place-making, public sports and leisure services are facing a perfect storm. Financial challenges, post-Covid recovery and long-term systemic issues all need to be addressed with some urgency.

Financial failure

Whilst financial pressures have been building for many years, COVID-19 has had a crippling impact on leisure providers. Analysis²² forecasts a £411 million revenue loss during 2020/21 for centres run by districts alone as a consequence of lockdowns, rising to nearly £600 million if other councils are considered.²³ Our research indicates that 13 per cent of respondents are having to consider further significant levels of budget reductions over the next three years, with one in four respondents indicating potential cuts of 10 per cent or more. However, when this figure was tested in our roundtable discussions, stakeholders felt that this figure could be understated and will not be properly felt until councils set their budgets for 2022/23.

The Government has made significant amounts of funding available to local government during the pandemic, including the £100m National Leisure Recovery Fund (NLRF). It also provided significant funding to businesses in the forms of grants and loans. But while this support has helped to address COVID-19 related expenditure and losses, the wider deficit in council budgets was estimated at £2.6 billion, in England alone, before the pandemic and leaves significant challenges for councils as they plan future service delivery.

Despite these budget gaps, many councils have used their own funds to provide emergency funding totalling £159 million²⁴ to help the survival of both operators and in-house teams, to secure this important public service, while leisure providers have contributed £144 million from their reserves²⁵. Equally in-house teams supported the overall pandemic efforts with the use of their staff and facilities for emergency support, including most recently the roll-out of testing centres and the vaccination programme. However, councils are now at a point where they must prioritise statutory services such as social care to balance their own funding pressures, and provider reserves have run out, as has the £100 million from the NLRF.

While the NLRF helped support many external providers during the pandemic, the long-term pressure on all leisure providers' reserves and income levels, and budgets for in-house providers, is significantly weakening their future resilience.

Historically the sector has responded innovatively to funding pressures by developing new sources of income from commercialising some of the 'products' that they provide such as charged-for fitness classes or cafes. This marginal profit has been necessary to cross-subsidise parts of the service, and support the need for councils to balance budgets particularly during periods of budget reductions to councils, by reducing reliance on central budget allocations. Such income has become a vital source of funding for public sport and leisure provision, helping to for example subsidise hall hire costs for local sports clubs, and enabling councils to deliver services to improve community health and social outcomes as well services that support local community/sports clubs. The focus and reliance on income generation has however reached the tipping point whereby it is undermining the ability of

22 <https://districtcouncils.info/press-releases/one-in-three-councils-expect-to-be-forced-to-close-leisure-centres-forever-new-survey>

23 Estimate by Sport England from the data collected as part of the evaluation of the National Leisure Recovery Fund.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

the service to reach those most in need.

Early indications from the approach taken to reopening suggests that councils and providers are emphasising the provision of traditional gyms, as this is the most successful income generator for facilities. However, this disguises the fact that gym equipment has therefore been moved into sports hall, squeezing out those activities that take place there. If this trend continues as a result of the need to maximise income for survival, the sector will lose the distinct offer it provides to communities, and many residents will lose key opportunities to improve their mental and physical health. Pure commercial activity should not become the sole focus of public leisure provision, which instead must be driven by objectives of increasing accessibility, boosting productivity, bringing communities together, and improving public health.

Closure of facilities

Our survey suggested that as many as one in four of councils are considering closing some leisure facilities in the next financial year. The District Councils' Network put this at even higher levels, with one in three of their district councils considering closures.²⁶

It is particularly worrying that both surveys suggest that for those facilities remaining open, it is the 'added social value' activities – social prescribing activities, targeted outreach at less active groups, and discounts for community or grassroots clubs – that are likely to be cut as services focus on their income generating activities, which is based predominantly on the provision of gym equipment.

Sport England research demonstrates that the social value generated by leisure centre²⁷ participation has fallen by almost half. Participation in leisure centres pre-pandemic in May and June 2019 generated £262 million in social value, however, data from the same months in May and June 2021 shows that £140m of social value has been generated through the consistent activity of participants across England since reopening. The reduction is driven by lower participation due to capacity restrictions across the sector as well as lower consumer confidence.

A need for capital investment

A significant number of councils also reported that the state of repair of their facilities had now reached a point where it is no longer possible to keep them open safely. This is particularly true of swimming pools, with major leaks and fabric issues leading to a number of current or imminent closures.

Over the longer term, it is clear that for many council areas, income from commercial services is not enough to generate both the revenue needed for long-term financial sustainability and the capital investment for refurbishing or rebuilding assets such as leisure centres and swimming pools. The loss of this public leisure and sporting infrastructure will not only have a negative effect on local communities but will cost more in the longer term if they have to rebuilt from scratch. Urgent capital investment is needed if the requirement for more funding in the future is to be avoided.

²⁶ <https://districtcouncils.info/press-releases/one-in-three-councils-expect-to-be-forced-to-close-leisure-centres-forever-new-survey>

²⁷ https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MC_SRA_04_Social-Value_Issued.pdf

11. Recommendations in depth

Our two main asks:

1. **The new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities should take responsibility for embedding the strategic role of public sport and leisure facilities within health systems and pathways, coordinating with DCMS, MHCLG and local government within England. All nations should consider how best to coordinate public sport and leisure provision across differing departments of Government.**

The way public sport and leisure services are viewed and utilised by national and local partners needs to urgently change to realise the social, economic and environmental benefits that public sport and leisure services offer. Achieving this will require leadership by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities in partnership with local and national government. **Our research shows that 63 per cent of health, wellbeing and physical activity programmes are commissioned by public health, of which 44 per cent is commissioned by the council and just under 40 per cent commissioned by the NHS.** While this demonstrates there is considerable existing work taking place, it is not a consistent picture across the UK and there is low awareness and communication within health services locally and nationally of the opportunities public sport and leisure services make to preventing ill health and reducing the burden on the NHS and social care services. Councils recognise that much more could be achieved with more joined-up leadership, co-ordination and vision for these vital services.

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities can play a key role in ensuring that the preventative contribution of public leisure services to the nation's wellbeing is not only recognised, but also clearly communicated in key strategies to promote good health, reduce obesity, promote physical activity and prevent illness. It can also help the new health system to see council sport and leisure services as strategic partners, promote integration of leisure and health services and align objectives with ICS enabling pooling of resources to tackle key local health needs. Critically, as councils expand their community-based offer and develop more targeted engagement of less active communities in places that feel comfortable for them to be active, the new Office has a role in establishing common evaluation frameworks to support an evidence-based approach, alongside Sport England and the learning from the Local Delivery Pilots.

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities should continue to build on the work of Public Health England and assume responsibility for developing data insights and health marketing campaign resources which can be tailored to local needs. It should run a national campaign to help rebuild the public's confidence to return to leisure centres. Particularly for those groups (women, Black and Asian adults, unemployed and people in less affluent areas who traditionally have lower activity levels but prefer to use leisure centres and people aged 55 and over, those with long-term health conditions or illnesses and children) who have been slow to return to physically active and are in need of extra support to do so.

2. **A £1 billion capital investment into the leisure estate based on established design plans would help to create hundreds of construction jobs, improve efficiency, reduce climate emissions and boost usage. Longer term, it would create new job opportunities and apprenticeships in areas of the sport and leisure industry typically taken by young people.**

English council's sporting infrastructure is extensive, community based, and popular. However, it is ageing, with Sport England estimating that 63 per cent of main sports halls and 60 per cent of swimming pools are past their expected lifespans or overdue refurbishment.²⁸ **As a result, the public leisure estate is not energy efficient and currently accounts for between 10 to 40 percent of a**

²⁸ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/nearly-two-thirds-leisure-centres-need-urgent-investment>

council's direct carbon emissions. Ageing facilities are hampering both national and local efforts to meet net zero targets and must be addressed as part of efforts to tackle the climate emergency.

Not all assets need replacing like for like. Councils in their role as place-makers want to work with communities to design the leisure centres, sports pitches, parks and other infrastructure that will best enable them to build activity into their lives. This could also mean realising the potential for new facilities to revitalise the high street, be co-located with other facilities to form wellbeing or community hubs, and ensuring they meet the latest environmental standards for energy efficiency. The ambition should align with '20 minute communities' so that everyone lives within 20 minutes of a high quality leisure facility, whether leisure centre, football pitch or public park; and with a plan to encourage people to use active travel options to visit their centre, boosting their activity levels and reducing reliance on the car, reducing emissions.

Sport England has been providing effective support and investment in infrastructure, but their funds are oversubscribed with 1,054 bids submitted to a grant fund that could only make 151 awards. An LGA submission to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee²⁹ 'Sport in our communities' (November 2020) suggests that had Sport England been able to fund those bids, it would have unlocked match funding worth at least £540 million from councils and partners. During its operation, the fund typically achieved a 30 per cent reduction in capital build cost through effective pre-planning design work; and a 40 per cent improvement in efficiency averaging £500,000 per year per facility. Scaling up this approach would ensure the best value from every penny of public investment and would create hundreds of construction jobs and opportunities for young people.

Across the UK administrations alternative opportunities exist to embed rebuild and refurbishment of the leisure estate as a core feature of funds designed to deliver wider objectives on levelling up or decarbonisation of assets.

Our seven recommendations

Recommendation 1:

DCMS should establish a programme for public sport and leisure services equivalent to its 'Valuing culture and heritage assets capital: a framework towards informing decision making' programme. The new programme should make statistics and evidence publicly available to aid the articulation of the value of public sport and leisure services locally and nationally in line with Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) Green Book.

Proving the value of public sport and leisure services in a consistent and outcome focussed way has always been a challenge. Simply focusing on outputs (visitor numbers/income/costs) does not do justice to the wider social value public sport and leisure services contribute to health outcomes, social inclusion, community safety, or the local economy and employment. Earlier this year, DCMS set out its ambition to develop a formal approach to valuing culture and heritage assets to support the sector to better evidence and articulate its value to decision makers.

The establishment of an equivalent programme for sport and leisure would help to develop a strong evidence base for their social and economic benefits and value and improve articulation to partners, this would help inform funding and decision making, ensuring best use of public funding. The need for such a programme is echoed by our research, which found that **over two thirds of survey respondents agreed that "more needed to be done to provide evidence and information about the value and effectiveness of our services in delivering wider social outcomes, inclusion and diversity"**

²⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/15079/html>

Recommendation 2:

DCMS and MHCLG should work in partnership with local government to build a robust case for the sustainable investment in public sport and leisure services, to be put forward to HMT for the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021. It should recognise the wider policy objectives that these services contribute to, and be supported by the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Department for Education (DfE) and NHS England in recognition of the critical role public sport and leisure services play in addressing their objectives.

The time is right for the Government, health partners and councils to work together to think through why these services are important for communities, what the priorities should be moving forward and how to utilise them as part of the COVID-19 recovery. **Our research demonstrated a strong view from councils and leisure providers (97 per cent) that these services could be commissioned to do more by achieving greater alignment with wider stakeholders.** It is also important to understand, and address, the universality of the public sport and leisure services to extend reach on a universal basis.

They will become increasingly important for long COVID-19 patients and in helping to reduce the burden on the NHS, which is seeing an unprecedented growth in waiting lists due to backlogs. Councils are already looking at how these services can play a role in the levelling up agenda, ensuring that areas with low life expectancy and limited digital access are able to make use of high-quality leisure facilities to be active.

In the words of Levelling Up Adviser Neil O'Brien, "it's very difficult to have a successful economy if lots of people are off sick."³⁰ However, the sector is facing unprecedented financial challenges, raising concerns about its sustainability and its ability and capacity to change. There is a risk that short-term, crisis driven approaches to budgeting could have potentially devastating impacts on the sector and to wider national objectives on health resilience, climate change, and levelling up. Realising the potential of these services will require all Government departments whose policy objectives would benefit from a strong public sport and leisure offer to come together and work with local government to demonstrate a robust case to HMT for a sustainable investment in these services.

Recommendation 3:

The DfE should work with Government departments and councils to map the provision of swimming facilities, and levels of curriculum attainment, investing to address gaps or future gaps in the system and making targeted support available to enable schools to invest in learn to swim and swim safety where the system is currently failing.

Councils play the central role in the provision of aquatics-based services. In total there are over 1000 council provided public pools across England alone, providing a huge range of different swimming programmes and opportunities throughout the life-course. **It is where the majority of young people learn to swim (typically 85 per cent) and it is where the sport of swimming is completely rooted. Schools cannot deliver the curriculum without them.**

This breadth and depth of swimming provision and programmed activity is unique and without it most swimming activities and swimming clubs would not exist. Future Olympic successes would be at risk due to the devastating impacts on the pathway of participation into performance sport. It is worth repeating that analysis by Swim England has revealed that child swimming attainment levels in 15 of the 20 local authority areas that are the shortest on water space are below the national average.

Furthermore, these public pools provide so much more than just swimming lessons. As community hubs they provide a safe place for people to meet and family groups to exercise, as well as deliver

³⁰ https://drive.google.com/file/d/10WZxowWhKfRblyfturn3_hRtQWAGOkR/view

targeted health programmes in pools for those who require low impact activity to boost their health. Furthermore, as our research identifies investing in swimming pools could significantly decrease the carbon footprint of the local authority and help in the achievement of net zero targets. In addition the LGA 'child-centred recovery' campaign identifies that council sport and leisure services can play a vital role in ensuring children have the best start in life, and ensuring these services are supported post-covid of a 'child-centred recovery.'

However, **in our consultations, swimming pools were highlighted as the type of facility that was most at risk** due to the high costs of continuing to heat, maintain and repair them. While addressing this needs to be part of wider investment, the Department for Education has the potential to make a critical difference through use of its existing funding and engagement with schools.

Recommendation 4:

Councils should consider what social value outcomes they want to achieve through public sport and leisure services and design services accordingly, including activities such as outreach work to support those who are most vulnerable. These objectives must also be fully embedded into procurement activity and contract management processes.

Our research shows that the sector strongly believes that public sport and leisure services could do much more to address health inequalities, add social value and additional community benefits and support the COVID-19 recovery. **Eighty-six per cent of survey respondents ranked health and wellbeing as the most important driver for providing leisure centres. Tackling inequalities, inclusion and diversity is the second main driver and an absence of a commercial offer was third.**

Councils, both as direct providers and service commissioners, can add community value through their activities in addition to their economic and/or income generating value, enabling the sector to take a more balanced approach.

COVID-19 has revealed that for services, whoever is the provider, the services are being driven by commercial measures and outputs, often delivered with very low margins or on a loss-basis. This approach has left the sector in a financially precarious position when the pandemic required facilities to close, and has led to significant additional investment from councils to support both in-house and external providers throughout this period. Those councils and providers with a strictly contractual relationship also tended to experience the greatest difficulty in agreeing forms of support to preserve leisure services for the community. While there is no reasonable scenario under which this could be fully avoided, the sector must ensure there is greater resilience among providers if they are to weather future challenges. That means councils recognising the social and economic value of public sport and leisure services which goes beyond a question of price-only considerations.

As we emerge from the pandemic, effective strategic relationships between council and provider, or senior management and heads of service for in-house services, will be essential to realising the potential of sport and leisure services to contribute to the wider agendas of health improvement and illness prevention, levelling up and improved workforce productivity, and increased confidence in using active travel options for journeys.

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012³¹ provides a useful lever to enable leisure services to refocus their priorities, align with wider objectives and reinvest in the service. It provides a significant framework for the public sector to engage more deeply with its supply chain by rewarding organisations that go beyond the provision of just the core contract requirements to deliver more value for the community.

We encourage councils to be more ambitious and to embrace the agenda by considering what social

31 The Social Value Act 2012 came into force in 2013. It requires all public sector organisations (and their suppliers) to look beyond the financial cost of a contract and consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of an area. https://drive.google.com/file/d/10WZxowWhKfRbLYftpun3_hRtQWAGOkR/view
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-value-act-information-and-resources/social-value-act-information-and-resources>

value they want to achieve as a council and to set this out in a Social Value Statement so that social value is embedded in all council activity and goes further than procurement activity. The LGA has produced a number of resources to support councils on their journey this includes the National Procurement Strategy 2018, Social Value Statement template, and good practice examples.³² The LGA has also contributed to the development of a Themes, Outcomes and Measurement tool, while other helpful tools for measuring social value can be found on the Social Value UK website. Climate change targets, equality and diversity goals, local skills development and supporting local supply chains are all issues that could be tackled through such approaches.

Recommendation 5:

Sport England (and other devolved administrations sports councils), UK Active and Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) should work together, with other key partners, to provide professional development opportunities that meet the future skills needs in a post-COVID-19 world. This should consider what is needed to tackle inequalities in access, including the implications of digital inequalities.

The pandemic accelerated a shift towards digital and online provision, as well as greater use of online booking tools. **Sixty-two per cent of respondents said that the future shape of sport and leisure services had been impacted by the pandemic with many respondents describing a shift towards more informal opportunities and community-based activities.** These shifts require skillsets that are different from the direct one to one or class-based provision that has been the traditional focus for leisure professionals to date. It is clear that we must move beyond traditional facility-based provision and invest in targeted activities and engagement if we are to encourage groups with traditionally lower levels of activity to participate in healthy activities. The post-pandemic world offers an immediate opportunity to capitalise on the innovative ways services have engaged residents and the different ways people have found to exercise – particularly online, family-based activities.

Many councils and operators are exploring more collaborative approaches to the development of physical activity and the role of public sport and leisure services specifically within it, as exemplified by Magna Vitae Trust's work with East Lindsey District Council.³³ Councils and operators are also progressively exploring ways that staff within the sector can expand their learning and understand how to be more empathetic and understanding in the delivery of services.

Understanding systems and the role of public leisure should not just be about leaders. Whole workforces should understand their role within that system. This work helps support public sport and leisure services to be commission ready for the health sector by ensuring there is a shared language, agreed evidence base and clear outcomes aligned to local health priorities.

Recommendation 6:

Investment should be made available to enable relevant bodies across the UK such as Sport England, the LGA, CLOA and APSE, alongside other UK administrative bodies for sport and leisure, to provide leadership development for portfolio holders and officers at a strategic and democratic governance level. A key element of the programme should be supporting elected members and officers to make the linkages with the wider system, including health systems.

Leadership is critical to realising the potential leisure services contribute to health, social, economic and climate outcomes, including connecting with Integrated Care Systems. Developing councillors and senior officers as strategic leaders, including democratic governance issues, alongside colleagues in leisure trusts and active partnerships is needed to ensure local opportunities can be seized and

³² <https://www.local.gov.uk/national-procurement-strategy>
<https://www.local.gov.uk/social-value-statement>
<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/financial-resilience-and-economic-recovery/procurement/achieving-community-benefits>

³³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/magna-vitae-trust-leisure-and-culture-providing-efficient-means-safeguarding-services>

integrated. In partnership with health colleagues, we need to facilitate the sharing of experiences and ideas, demonstrate workable models of collaboration and evidence outcomes. Leadership development will need to be supplemented by case studies of innovative practice, toolkits and guides on commissioning and procurement, and opportunities to problem-solve as a sector.

Understanding behaviour change, systems working, and asset- or strengths-based approaches were all mentioned as being essential building blocks for place-based leadership. Being able to build positive relationships with key stakeholders allows the development of trust and a desire to work together to meet shared goals and outcomes. This needs to happen at personal, community and strategic levels. As the CIMPSA mentioned this collaborative approach requires working with traditional and non-traditional partners to realise the power of “movement as medicine” and demonstrating the professionalisation of the sector in the eyes of health and other non-sector based colleagues.

Existing provision, such as the LGA and Sport England’s leadership programmes for councillors and officers, alongside support from CLOA and APSE’s peer mentoring networks, have demonstrated the appetite for this kind of support and the benefits of doing so. A continuation and potential expansion of this work to align or combine with comparable training for non-sector based partners, such as health workers offers significant potential to transform the way that health and leisure services work together to promote healthier, more active, and longer lives.

Recommendation 7:

The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) should enhance its capacity, increase its visibility and engagement with the Government, and accelerate its work.

Respondents to our survey recognised the work of a diverse range of organisations providing expertise in specific areas of work, such as skills development, facilities design, and community engagement. However, this plurality of voices led to concerns that there was no single voice into government on behalf of the sector.

The LGPAP has brought together the key national organisations with an interest in public sport and leisure services and has begun collaborating to coordinate and strengthen leadership for the sector and visibility of the sector nationally. More emphasis now needs to be placed on its wider engagement with the sector and with Government. In turn, Government should make use of this group as a sounding board and stakeholder for exploring policy options to support the nation to be active, whether through providing facilities for grassroots clubs or giving the opportunity for the elite athletes of the future to discover their sport of choice.

12. Conclusion

Public sport and leisure services have an important role in shaping places, levelling up and building back a fairer and more sustainable future. It's more important now than ever to clearly understand and capitalise on the uniqueness of public sport leisure provision and its ability to reach many people from all backgrounds.

Whilst some changes may require a longer-term invest to save approach, many of these are of no-cost or cost-neutral. Where investment is required, this will save money in the long term by reducing energy usage or demand for costly NHS operations or social care support.

The findings are supported by rich evidence which suggests that there is a unique contribution that public leisure makes to communities; stepping in where the private sector cannot afford to operate, and delivering critical public policy objectives like social prescribing, supporting community and grassroots sport, and drowning prevention. It provides practical insights for those tasked with implementing the recommendations. However, it is critical that we now address the perfect storm of systemic fault-lines in how we view the contribution of public sport and leisure services, the impact of long-term funding pressures and the immediate and long-term impact of the health pandemic on public sport and leisure provision.

By adopting these measures, Government(s) across the UK and councils can dramatically improve the fortunes and health of their local communities, make a significant contribution towards meeting climate change targets, and lay the foundations for healthy communities in resilient places.

In turn, the LGA, CLOA, and APSE will design our sector support offer around councils' needs in this space.

We will continue to work with partners through the LGPAP, and the wider sector through the National Sector Partnership Group, to champion the importance of physical activity in national and local policy.

We will continue to extend an open offer to UK Government(s) and sporting bodies across the four nations as they develop policies and funding priorities

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