

Full 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.

The Author, Mark Allman is an experienced senior leader of change and transformation in the physical activity, sport and Leisure sector, having worked in both private and public sectors. Mark led the Sport and Leisure service in Leeds for most of the 25 years he worked for the City Council before semi retiring in 2020. He also held a number of NED roles outside the work environment including Leeds Rhinos Foundation, Leeds Triathlon Centre (now Triathlon Leeds) and Skills Active. Mark has also held the position of Chair of the Chief Culture and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) between 2015 and 2017 and immediate past Chair until 2019 and remains an active member of the CLOA Executive, now serving as Hon Secretary. Currently Mark is Associate partner with Ashton Consulting Board. He is a collaborative leader and relationship builder. Specialties include public sector, change management, strategic management, sport development, facility management and major world events.

The research team are grateful to the many local authority officers, elected members and Trusts who gave their time in attending roundtable events, completing surveys and sharing their experiences and case studies.

Thanks to Ian Brookes and Debbie Kaye of the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association, (CLOA) Ian Leete and Samantha Ramanah of the Local Government Association (LGA), and Paul O'Brien, who originally commissioned the research, Rob Bailey and Mo Baines of APSE.

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Published by APSE, November 2021

ISBN: 978-1-907388-78-1

1. Introduction

The scope of the research

The original scope of this research report was to provide a rounded assessment of the current challenges facing local authority sport and leisure services; whilst many of those challenges already existed it was recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated existing challenges but also created new ones. The original scope of this report was therefore to provide essential intelligence to help inform, and positively influence, the future direction of public sport and leisure services, and to explore its wider contribution to community wellbeing and placemaking. As our research evolved it became clear that other factors, would, by necessity, need to be explored to provide a more holistic view on the issues raised by research participants.

1.1 The current context

The 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 what our communities will need from our facilities and services in the future, and design new, more efficient and

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

Fig 1: Swimming facilities timeline



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 to our surveys and roundtables 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.

1.2 A brief history of public sports and leisure services

Councils have a long and proud history, and commitment, to providing public sport and leisure services dating back to the 1800s, when they took on new powers for improving the health and hygiene of the population, during the industrial revolution. This soon led to the introduction of bath houses, and later swimming pools, which has gone on to become a core part of these services. In post war times civic leaders recognised leisure as a vital part of building back communities and local economies and the sense of civic pride they created. Throughout the years their offer has diversified helping to generate increased public demand and a public expectation of councils to provide sport and leisure services.

Councils have voluntarily embraced the provision of these services without specific funding to do so. In fact, they are the largest funder of these services, Local government currently spends £1.1 billion per year on sport, leisure, parks and green spaces, playgrounds and community halls. By comparison, Sport England spends £253.5 million per year, and the National Heritage Lottery Fund spends part of its £357.2 million per year on parks-related projects. They recognise the benefits that these services can contribute to across a range of different outcomes, including for example community pride, provision of sports opportunities for all, improved health, or stronger local economy.

Public sport and leisure services are unique, providing a huge range and depth of services and are open to all to take part. In recent years the sector has had to deliver massive budget reductions due to overall cuts to local government budgets, this has resulted in a shift in focus to those parts of the service that can generate income. However, the breadth, depth and accessibility still remain very different to the private sector offer.

Councils provide a service that everyone should be able to access, importantly it provides an affordable and subsidised option for individuals on low or no incomes, but it also provides a culture that is rooted and driven by the community. This is not offered elsewhere at the scale that councils do.

Councils are the biggest provider of swimming pools in the country, for example in England they are responsible for over 1,000 leisure facilities with publicly accessible pools. The importance of learning to swim and water safety was formally recognised in 1994 when it was added to the national curriculum, making it a statutory duty for schools to ensure that every child can swim 25m unaided and can keep themselves safe in water upon leaving primary school. Councils also provide the chance for learn to swim beyond the school environment and in total at any one time in England there can be near to 1.2M² children engaged in learn to swim programmes

Councils have also long seen the value of local sports clubs. These clubs provide opportunities to

2 Swim England Swim census 2018 <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/swim-census-2018-workforce-learn-swim-statistics/>

take part in sport which are integral to community identity and development, engagement and inclusion, tackling social isolation and loneliness, as well as improving physical and mental health. These clubs help to support the development of sporting pathways with grass roots participation right through into the development of our future sporting elite, through the provision of the facilities and infrastructure, for the performance athletes themselves.

During the pandemic leisure centres and staff members further demonstrated their value by rapidly turning their efforts to respond to the crisis, highlighting their role as essential community hubs.

Public sport and leisure facilities form a cornerstone of our national infrastructure and play an important role in preparing for and delivering world class; such events include the upcoming 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, and the 2012 London Olympics and will enable us to put in strong bids to host future events such as a UK-wide bid to host the FIFA 2030 World Cup.

1.3 Delivering multiple national and local priority outcomes

Publicly run sport and leisure services play a crucial role in supporting multiple priority outcomes, especially improving health and mental wellbeing and enriching the lives of individuals in communities across their lifetime.

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 – a return on investment of £3.91 for every £1 spent.

Continued investment can reduce the burden on key public services with social returns estimated at a value of £9.6 billion from improvements in our nation's health and £41.8 billion from improved mental wellbeing.

Public sport and leisure services play a crucial part in shaping places and in this specific context, creating active places. They can play an important future role in levelling up and building back a fairer and more sustainable future.

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 be changed 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. 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.
- The focus on efficiencies, including greater reliance on income generation, which public sport and leisure services have had to rely upon, have not been reinvested into the service but instead those savings have mainly been used to support other public services. The sector risks becoming increasingly inaccessible as it has to focus on ever greater financial returns from those that can afford to pay and risks a lack of focus and support on those most in need.
- 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, social care 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, DLUHC (formerly 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.

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 decisionmaking' 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 DLUHC 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 health 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 on pages 41 et seq.



Fig 2: Inequalities



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.



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.



Significantly, it appears that public sport and leisure facilities are more likely to be used by underrepresented groups. Early findings from the Moving Communities platform reveals that since reopening there has been a strong return of participants from more deprived areas to leisure centres. Recent customer experience survey data collected through Moving Communities from 1,183 public leisure centres shows a direct correlation between deprivation decile and a preference to exercise in a leisure centre rather than at home or outdoors due to lack of indoor and outdoor space. This is important because 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.



Data also reveals fewer visits by women to leisure centres since reopening compared to men.



Activity levels for Black and Asian adults has dropped by almost five per cent since November 2019 and both ethnic groups are 10-14% 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.

3. 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.

Positive outcomes derived from public sport and leisure services

3.1 Improving the public's health and wellbeing

There is clear evidence that being physically active has powerful impacts on a range of health and wellbeing outcomes. A number of conditions can be improved through preventative approaches, by getting people more active as well as through targeted commissioned activity for people with long term conditions. Being more physically active can support directly the NHS long term plan. By embracing an active 'place' it can improve health outcomes for many and reduce the burden on the NHS and improve productivity in the workplace.

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.³ 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 disease⁴, particularly amongst those most exposed to health inequalities. (See Fig 3).

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.⁵ Even realising a fraction of this would be a significant investment in the nation's wellbeing.

Being physically active also plays a significant part in helping to address obesity levels alongside a balanced diet. Within the national obesity strategy Councils are being encouraged to expand their provision of services in this area and where not available to guide people to the free NHS 12 week plan⁶. Public sport and leisure services can directly support the NHS "Better Weight" campaign in an effort to encourage more people to lose weight.

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.

3 Available at <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=lf7FqnmAz8U3LLQu14rb1yIKL4SUJ7>

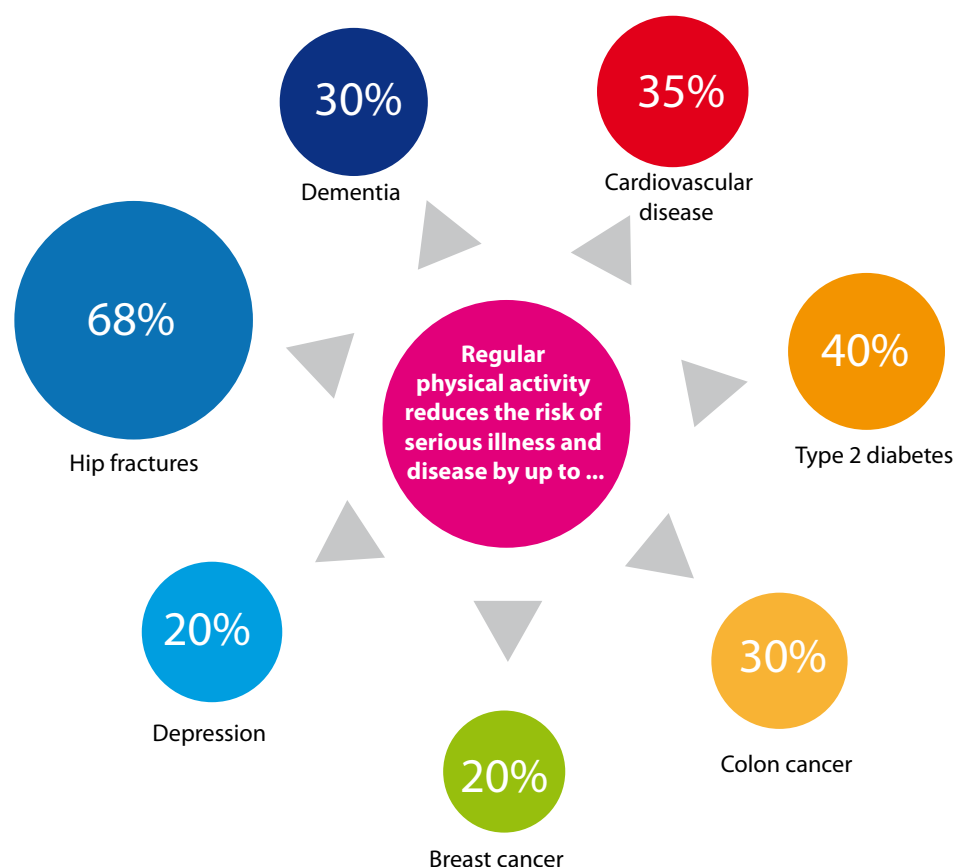
4 Public Health England available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health>

5 Sport England available at <https://www.sportengland.org/news/why-investing-physical-activity-great-our-health-and-our-nation>

6 NHS Twelve Week Plan <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/start-the-nhs-weight-loss-plan/>

Fig. 3: Contribution of public sport and leisure services to wider outcomes

Community sport and activity generate £85.5 billion of social and economic value in England. This equates to a return on investment of £3.91 for every £1 spent.



3.2 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 5.7 million people with deteriorating health conditions as a result of the expansion of NHS waiting lists⁷ 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 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, of these, half were classified as obese, while 20 per cent of year 6 children were classified as obese⁸. 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.

⁷ BMA Monthly analysis of NHS data updated September 2021 available at <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/pressure-points-in-the-nhs>

⁸ Health Survey for England 2018 available at <http://healthsurvey.hscic.gov.uk/media/81625/HSE18-Adult-Child-Obesity-rep.pdf>

Fig. 4: Pressures on NHS, Social Care and Leisure Services



The impact of long-COVID which is reported to affect 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 lists due to pressure on elective surgery and treatment backlogs.



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.

Obesity in an ageing population is going up with cost implications to both the health and social care systems which are already at breaking point.



Sport England estimates that 63% of main sports halls and 60% of swimming pools are past their expected lifespans or overdue refurbishment.

As a result, the public leisure estate is not energy efficient and currently accounts for between 10 to 40 % of a council's direct carbon emissions.

The cost to the NHS for treating obesity-related ill health is forecast to rise to £9.7 billion per year by 2050.

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. **The cost to the NHS for treating obesity-related ill health is forecast to rise to £9.7 billion per year by 2050.** Being physically active plays a significant part in helping to address obesity levels alongside a balanced diet. Councils are crucial partners in responding to the obesity crisis and delivering the Government's obesity strategy. Public sport and leisure services can directly support the NHS "Better Weight" campaign in an effort to encourage more people to lose weight. 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.

Public Sport and Leisure services should feature as a key partner within new integrated care systems (ICS), playing their part in the delivery of local health improvement plans and preventative programmes. This ambition is backed by councils, our research shows that **over 50 per cent of the respondents to our survey said that councils play a central leadership role in driving up levels of physical activity and providing life-long opportunities to be active.** This was loudly echoed by all parts of the sector, including Non-Governmental Bodies (NGBs), leisure trusts, elected members, and other arm's length bodies in our extensive roundtable discussions.

9 The Kings Fund 'Tackling Obesity' July 2021 available at <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/Tackling%20obesity.pdf>

The new ICS also offers significant potential to connect leisure into healthcare systems and an opportunity to rethink and redesign how and where services are delivered.

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 services.

Nottingham Case Study

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.

East Riding Case study

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. 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.

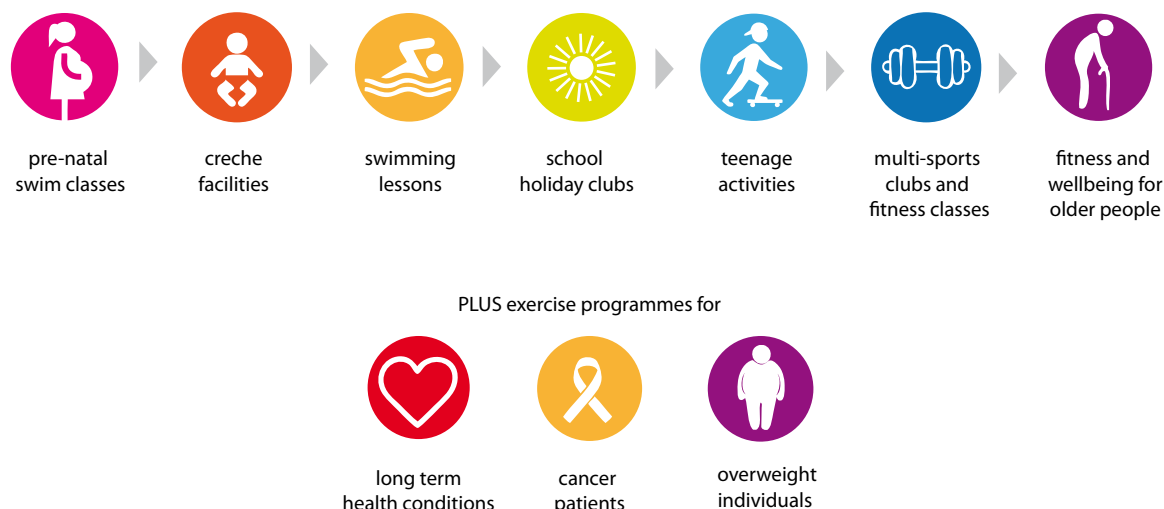
3.3 Unique community assets and contributors to place-making

Council sport and leisure services provide a unique offer, supporting 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 spaces¹⁰. 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 health visitors for new-borns, 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 even greater as we seek to address huge health inequalities that have been exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ LGA written evidence to the DCMS Parliamentary Committee 13 November 2020
Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/15079/html/>

Fig. 5: The range and depth of provision at all stages of life is what makes public leisure unique



Public sport and leisure services are a part of the social infrastructure of the nation. They support work to tackle loneliness and health inequalities. 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 and they create job opportunities for thousands. 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 rates¹¹, 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, *"it's very difficult to have a successful economy if lots of people are off sick."*

Public sport and leisure services (in terms of leisure centres specifically) are essential community hubs and a huge source of civic pride. They are often at the centre of their communities and are an integral part of local community life. There are now many examples of how these community hubs are integrated with other services and are often at the leading edge of driving this change. Integrated services include for example, community contact centres, libraries, adult social care day care, and NHS GP surgeries. This trajectory of service integration is one that will continue as it further underlines the value and strategic significance of public sport and leisure services within localities.

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 facilities¹². 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

¹¹ Charlton, Judith & Rudisill, Caroline & Bhattarai, Nawaraj & Gulliford, Martin. (2013). Impact of deprivation on occurrence, outcomes and health care costs of people with multiple morbidity. Journal of health services research & policy. 18. 10.1177/1355819613493772.

¹² Anthony Crozier and the PAEx team at Liverpool John Moore's University. Not available online.

programmes¹³. Voluntary groups like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) rely on public swimming pools to train their lifeguards during the winter months and 72 per cent of primary schools rely on publicly provided pools to deliver their statutory responsibility for children to learn to swim.¹⁴ 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 communities¹⁵.

3.4 National and local economy - supporting inclusive growth

Being physically active can play a central role in supporting a healthy and active workforce, with public sports and leisure programmes focussed on employability and the general physical and mental wellbeing of local people and staff. According to the 'Get Britain Standing' campaign absenteeism in the workplace can fall by as much as 42% through wellness programmes, including physical activity programmes¹⁶. Leisure centres of themselves can also act as major community hubs in their own right, often being a focal point for communities, helping places to be attractive areas in which to live and work. This supports inward investment opportunities at a local economy level.

Moreover, sports and leisure services are also major employers in their own right, acting as a gateway for young people in particular, to enter the job market. On an economy wide basis estimates from EMSI (Economic Modelling Specialists International) the sports industry is worth £23bn supporting close to 1 million jobs across the UK¹⁷. Many public sport and leisure services are the biggest employers of young people within their communities.

3.5 Contribution to Life-long learning and life skills

Where integrated with other services such as libraries or social care their reach and value is extended even further. Learning to swim and swim safely is an essential life skill and one where Council swimming pools provide the vast majority of opportunities to be taught. Any major reduction in provision would severely undermine the swimming ability of the whole UK population.

Sport and leisure services provides an environment within which to learn a variety of different life skills and activities throughout the life course. This can go beyond sport and can include provision of other activities such as adult education, road safety, and cycle safety, and culture. We also know that for young people being physically active can help improve educational attainment levels as supported by a Public Health England study conducted with the Youth Sport Trust (YST), and Association of Colleges Sport in 2015¹⁸

3.6 Contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation

An active community can significantly help support ambitious climate change targets in terms of encouraging more people to be active and using more sustainable methods of transport, including for example active travel programmes and cycleways.

13 The Kings Fund for The District Councils Network Buck, D, and Dunn, P, (2015) 'The district council contribution to public health: a time of challenge and opportunity' Available at https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_file/district-council-contribution-to-public-health-nov15.pdf

14 Moving Communities Available at https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MC_SRA_04_Social-Value_Issued.pdf

15 Sport England 'Why Investing in Physical Activity is Great for our Nation and Our Health' Available at <https://www.sportengland.org/news/why-investing-physical-activity-great-our-health-and-our-nation>

16 Get Britain Standing Campaign website available at <http://www.getbritainstanding.org/>

17 The Economic Impact of the Sports Sector – EMSI Available at <https://www.economicmodelling.co.uk/2013/05/03/the-economic-impact-of-the-sports-sector/>

18 'What works in schools and colleges to increase physical activity?' (2015) Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876242/Guidance_to_increase_physical_activity_among_children_and_young_people_in_schools_and_colleges.pdf

Moreover, it is quite common for leisure centres, especially those with pools, to represent a very large percentage of the Councils typical carbon footprint; this was found to be the case during our research roundtables, where **some district councils reported that leisure centres can represent up to 40 per cent or more of their carbon footprint** making these facilities a priority for decarbonisation programmes. Our research also 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 repairs¹⁹. Retrofitting is part of the solution but often many facilities need a complete redesign or replacement if they are to meet the future needs of their communities and climate change targets. It therefore stands to reason that investing in more energy efficient sport and leisure centres could help to have a significant impact in decarbonising the local authority property estate. Moreover, this investment would also allow centres to be upgraded or replaced, helping to address the urgent need for investment in the physical infrastructure of the sector. In turn this would help to bolster local economies through the creation of construction jobs and preserving those jobs within the sports and leisure sector itself, which are under threat due to the impact from COVID-19 and longstanding investment needs.

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 new facilities.

Exeter case

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.

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.

¹⁹ Sport England Available at <https://www.sportengland.org/research/benefits-of-sport/health-and-benefits-of-sport/engaging-inactive-people/>

3.7 Supporting local sports clubs and the elite sport system

Public sport and leisure services support a wide array of sports and their local clubs, as illustrated with swimming and diving. In many cases these facilities are an essential part of the pathway of participation, and then into performance and elite sport. Councils more recently, particularly since the responsibility for public health became a statutory duty for upper tier and unitary councils in 2012, have understandably focused on how they might increase levels of physical activity more broadly to support wider health outcomes rather than sport specifically. However, there is a real danger that some grass roots sports will be severely impacted should parts of the local government sport and leisure services system fail or the focus of councils supporting sports be watered down further in the future. We know swimming is hugely dependent on Councils for their custodianship of their assets and without pools there would be devastating impacts on learn to swim and the sporting pathway. The same is true of other sports where relationships have been developed and Non-Governmental Bodies (NGBs) are reliant on the support of Councils, whether for example this is Tennis, Athletics, Badminton, Squash, Football or Rugby.

3.8 Major sporting events

Councils act as co-funders and enablers of major cultural and sporting events both in terms of infrastructure/facilities and the positive impact it has on opportunities for local people and communities. For example, Birmingham City Council has co-funded 25 per cent of the Commonwealth Games 2022 with the Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport funding the remainder, helping to bring the Games to Birmingham and putting the UK on a global platform. Major sporting events give the UK a global platform and support our standing on a world stage. The delivery of major events can draw on our rich cultural and sporting history to enhance the UK's 'soft power' internationally, revitalise the visitor economy as the economy begins to recover from COVID-19 and promote civic pride in communities. These events also fulfil the need for people to come together with a shared identity and purpose. Major sporting events bring significant investment into their host area and region, which, with the right objectives, planning and delivery, can boost local and regional economies, increase job and volunteering opportunities and create more vibrant places to live, visit and play for generations to come. For example, Birmingham City Council's bid to host the Commonwealth Games 2022 focused on a bid for the wider region not just for Birmingham.

3.9 Increased need of subsidised leisure activities and targeted support

The impact from COVID-19 has resulted in an upsurge in unemployment rates. Significantly between 13 March 2020 and 14 May 2020 (the first months of lockdown) there were 2.4 million starts to Universal Credit. Furthermore, in the 5 weeks to 14 January 2021 there were 200,000 starts to Universal Credit, compared with 130,000 starts to Universal Credit in the 4 weeks to 9 January 2020. Even as sections of the economy reopen some hard-hit industries may take much longer to recover.

Essentially those newly in receipt of benefits will be those in more need of local authority services and support. This will include for example, subsidised leisure activities, but equally an expansion in targeted support to avoid the associated unemployment impacts on mental and physical health and wellbeing. Failing to tackle poor mental health will create a drag on future prosperity. Policies to tackle unemployment should also aim to improve mental health and more innovative ways of reaching these groups and designing services to meet their needs will be required.

The pandemic has also had a profound effect on the nation's mental health with a 21 per cent of adults experiencing some form of depression in early 2021 (27 January to 7 March) an increase of 2 per cent since November 2020 and more than double that observed before the pandemic (10%). In addition,

around 1 in 3 adults who reported being unable to afford an unexpected expense experienced depressive symptoms in early 2021, compared with 1 in 5 adults before the pandemic²⁰. In January 2021, 43% of unemployed people had poor mental health²¹.

It is widely recognised that exercise improves mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative mood and by improving self-esteem and cognitive function as well as helping to alleviate symptoms such as low self-esteem and social withdrawal, which are symptoms also consistent with people who are unemployed. For example, a study by the Mental Health Foundation²² found that people with severe mental health problems have a shorter life expectancy and a higher risk of developing some medical conditions; however, an empowering programme that increases levels of physical activity may play a role in reducing this mortality gap. This makes public sport and leisure services such as group exercise programmes, swimming and gyms even more crucial for people with new or existing mental health problems and the unemployed to support the reduction of anxiety and depression, tackle loneliness and improve self-confidence and motivation.

20 ONS People Population and Community Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/januarytomarch2021>

21 [https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/unemployment-and-mental-health#:~:text=In%20January%202021%2C%2043%25%20of,were%20on%20furlough%20\(34%25\).&text=Designing%20employment%20programmes%20to%20support,people%20with%20mental%](https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/unemployment-and-mental-health#:~:text=In%20January%202021%2C%2043%25%20of,were%20on%20furlough%20(34%25).&text=Designing%20employment%20programmes%20to%20support,people%20with%20mental%20health%20problems%20and%20the%20unemployed%20to%20support,the%20reduction%20of%20anxiety%20and%20depression,tackle%20loneliness%20and%20improve%20self-confidence%20and%20motivation.)

22 Empowering People Through Physical Activity Published by the Mental Health Foundation Available at <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/empowering-people-through-physical-activity>

Fig. 6: Swimming



85% of young people learn to swim in a public swimming pool.



The sport of swimming is completely rooted in (or dependent on) public swimming pools.



Schools cannot deliver the (learn to swim and water safety) curriculum without public swimming pools.



Swimming is one of the most popular sports activities, with around 14 million people taking part each year (before COVID-19),



Swim England predicts 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 impact on children from Black, Asian and other diverse ethnic communities (with 33% able to swim 25m compared to 49% 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% of children in year 7 living in the least deprived areas).

4. Supporting the national curriculum for learn to swim and water safety

4.1 Learning to swim

Since 1994, swimming and water safety has been a statutory element of the national curriculum for physical education in England. This means that every 11-year-old child should leave primary school with the skills to keep themselves safe while enjoying swimming with friends and family.

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). More than two thirds of swimming classes take place in council-owned facilities, and there is limited private sector provision.

More than two million children missed the chance to go swimming during the lockdowns with five million lessons lost, most of which will have been school swimming sessions. Providing ongoing support for this generation of young people is essential which is why many councils and their operators are exploring ways of targeting support and providing additional lessons.

4.2 Councils are the cornerstone for swimming

Councils play a 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%) 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 totally unique and without it most swimming activities and swimming clubs would not exist and our Olympic hopes would be a pipe dream, largely due to the devastating impacts on the pathway of participation into performance sport.

Furthermore, these public pools provide so much more. Introducing children to swimming within leisure centres can help to create a safe and positive experience of using them and signpost them to the other activities they provide. It also helps to promote healthy and active lifestyles which is valuable for good mental wellbeing and has been shown to help improve attainment. As community hubs they provide a safe place for people to meet and also provide opportunities to deliver targeted health programmes in pools helping support the wellness of our communities. This breadth and depth of the service offer together with its importance to local communities underlines that these services are essential and as important as those that hold statutory status.

4.3 Access to swimming: An issue of equity

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 from 77 per cent 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 impact²³ 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).

Therefore as Councils are responsible for the majority of swimming facilities 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 and swimming clubs would not exist without them along with our elite swimming athletes.

23 Swimming.Org Library available at <https://www.swimming.org/library/46/5146>

5. What are the challenges for the sector?

The sector faces many challenges and in this next chapter we explore what those challenges are and what solutions may be available with the right support and resources from UK administrations, local authorities, and other partners.

5.1 A leadership challenge

The impact of investing in creating an active place and specifically investing in public sport and leisure can be so very powerful. Its' ability to deliver against so many priorities should theoretically place it in a strong position. Yet often this isn't the case. This strength can be a weakness too as these services don't often drop neatly into one box such health, or economy, or communities and environment. This fragmentation is further demonstrated as sport and leisure functions can appear in many different officer and political portfolios within Councils. Whilst 'Leisure Services' departments were common in local authorities during the 1980s and 1990s, this is no longer the case.

Our survey found that around a quarter of respondents felt that there was no clear political understanding or written policy for the provision and support of leisure centres and swimming pools, with a third reporting this to be the case for sport/physical activity development. While just under half of respondents agreed that contributions to wider outcomes (including equality and diversity) are fully scrutinised by senior officers

and by elected members within their council. In response to being asked if their council has a clear written policy position on increasing levels of physical activity, the picture was mixed with physical activity appearing in many different strategy documents ranging from the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, council plan or local health and wellbeing strategy. On the one hand this may be seen as a positive as clearly the impact of sports and leisure provision is being recognised across multiple policies and departments within some councils. Equally these findings may be seen as an indication that the value of these services is not yet fully understood locally and that further support is needed to help scrutinise and articulate its value to transform it from being seen as simply a commissioner and income generator to a strategic partner, capable of delivering on a wide range of local outcomes.

There are a diverse range of national organisations providing expertise in specific areas in support of public sport and leisure services, such as skills development, facilities design, and community engagement. However, this plurality of voices has historically made it difficult for the sector to have a single voice into government. This was particularly critical during the pandemic when it was increasingly difficult for the sector to influence key policy decisions about investment into the leisure sector. The pandemic has helped to accelerate the work of the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership. It brings 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. It offers Government the opportunity to use it as a sounding board and stakeholder for exploring policy options to support the nation to be active.

Equally at a national level there isn't a clear home for public sport and leisure services, with it currently straddling the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) but it clearly has a heavy impact on the policy objectives of Department for Work and Pensions, (DWP), Department for Education (DFE) and the Department for Health and Social Security (DHSS). Improving local delivery requires a joined-up approach at national level. A lack of ownership for strategic policy for sport and health outcomes at a national level causes challenges for councils and local partners when seeking to join up these initiatives in their local places. A strategic partnership between DCMS and local government public sport and leisure services is required to better join up national and local systems. The creation of a forum to discuss areas of

greatest need and priority areas of investment across a range of departmental areas. It could help unify disparate government funding streams from a range of departments with different timescales, application processes, and reporting requirements, to allow targeted, joined up investments that maximises investment while minimising bureaucracy

5.2 Sector recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Insights from the Moving Communities platform²⁴ demonstrates the significance of public leisure centres in the activity habits of customers' lives, with **86 per cent of people saying they preferred exercising in leisure centres 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, 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 challenges²⁵ with Sport England estimating²⁶ 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' report²⁷ 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'; and create community hubs by co-locating with wider wellbeing services like GP surgeries, care homes, libraries, and beauty salons²⁸. 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, as we explore in more detail in chapter 6, 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 National Leisure Recovery Fund (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.²⁹

24 Moving Communities Report July 2021 Available at <https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Moving-Communities-Report-July-2021-Compressed.pdf>

25 LGA Supporting Leisure Providers available at <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Options%20for%20councils%20in%20supporting%20leisure%20providers%20through%20>

26 Data contained with LGA briefing available at <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/nearly-two-thirds-leisure-centres-need-urgent-investment>

27 DCMS Committee Report 'Sport in our Communities' Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmcmds/45/4502.htm>

28 TCPA 'The 20 minute neighbourhood' available at <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-20-minute-neighbourhood>

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

This has been compounded by **reductions in membership by as much as 50 per cent in some areas**.³⁰ Even where visits have returned to between 70-80 per cent of pre-COVID-19 numbers this still creates significant losses of up to 30 per cent, 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.

³⁰ Moving Communities available at [https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Moving-Communities-In-F](https://movingcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Moving-Communities-In-F-the-20-minute-neighbourhoodocus_Issue-2_240621.pdf) <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/>



6. Our emerging findings in depth

Our research sought to understand the unique offering of public sports and leisure services as part of the local eco-system of sport and physical activity at a locality level. We therefore set out to define what we mean by 'public sports and leisure' services. The following reflects the views of our research round tables and survey findings.

6.1 Defining public sport and leisure services

Our research sought to understand the unique offering of public sports and leisure services as part of the local eco-system of sport and physical activity at a locality level. We therefore set out to define what we mean by 'public sports and leisure' services. The following reflects the views of our research round tables and survey findings.

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 public spender on sport, leisure, parks and green spaces, spending £1.1 billion per year.³¹ (Fig. 7)

The context: views of local authorities

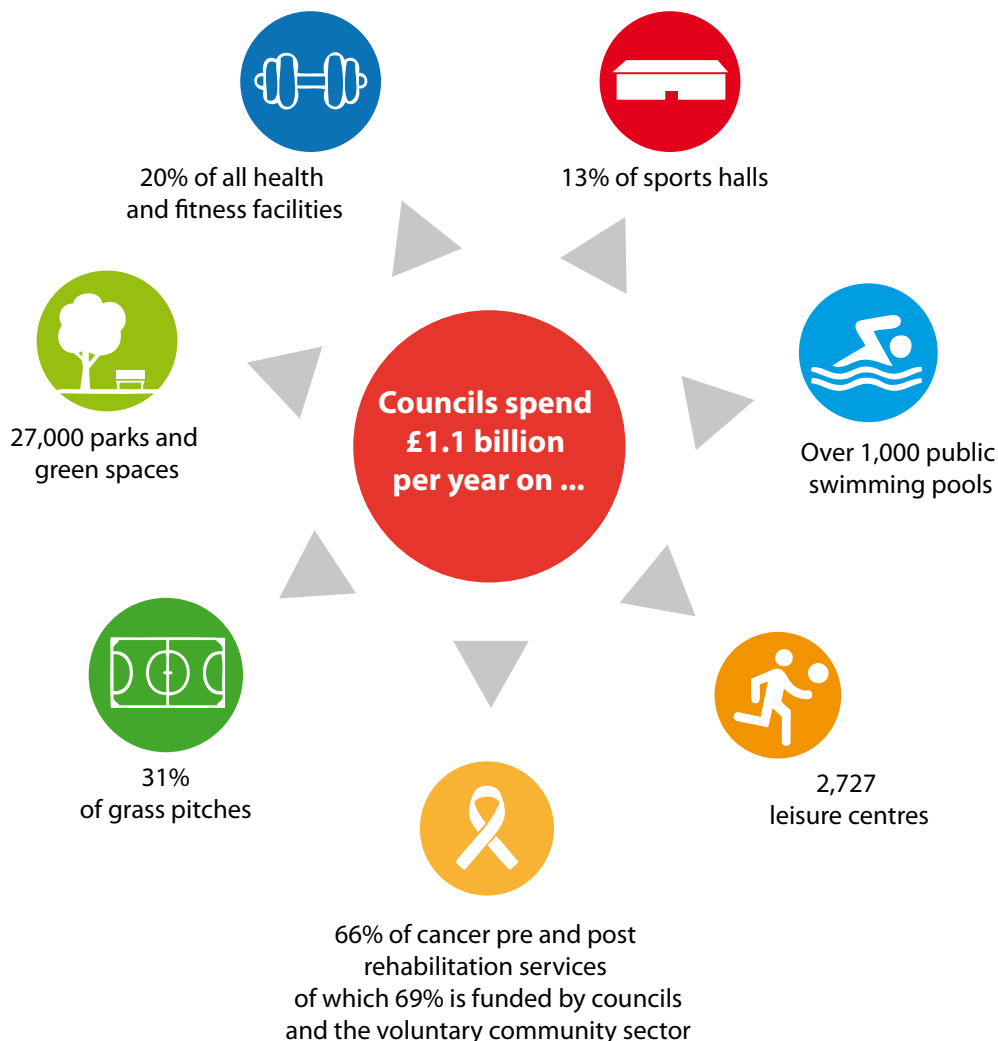
6.2 A desire for change

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 legally to do so. There is **a strong view**

³¹ LGA (ibid) <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/15079/html/>

Fig 7; Spending

Councils in England are currently the biggest spenders on sport, leisure, parks and green spaces



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. The acute challenges faced by the sector during the pandemic has 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 themost. The second is the ability of these services to be commissioned to deliver targeted support to people with specific needs.

Our research participants, and survey 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 reforms³², implementation of Sport England's strategy 'Uniting the Movement',³³ refresh of the DCMS, 'Sporting Future' strategy and the Government's obesity strategy³⁴ provide a very significant opportunity to integrate sport and leisure services with the health and place-based outcomes and wider policy objectives.

Indeed our roundtables also found significant references to the well-being agenda and the stated priority of the Westminster government in 'levelling up' and its commitment to 'build back better'. Notably 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

6.3 Impacts from financial failure

Whilst financial pressures have been building for many years, COVID-19 has had a crippling impact on leisure providers. Analysis³⁵ 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.³⁶ **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.**³⁷

Despite these budget gaps, many councils have used their own funds to provide emergency funding totalling £159 million³⁸ 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 reserves³⁹. 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.

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

33 Sport England 'Uniting the Movement' e<https://www.sportengland.org/why-were-here/uniting-the-movement>

34 Tackling Obesity Published July 2020 available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-obesity-government-strategy/tackling-obesity-empowering-adults-and-children-to-live-healthier-lives>

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

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

37 Ibid

38 Ibid

39 District Councils network Ibid

Whilst 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 as 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 the service to reach those most in need. Instead, efficiencies generated through income generation, or spend to save initiatives such as new gym facilities, have been absorbed into council budget savings and delivery of other public services, and have rarely been used to expand reach of the service to those most in need. This was a recurring theme in the research roundtables.

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.

Uncertainty in the sector about the viability of leisure operators and the impacts of COVID in the short to medium term is also creating challenges for Councils who are approaching the end of contracts (where services have been externalised) with a number now looking at alternative models of delivery such as insourcing services as a short-term response. Time will tell whether this trend will continue, and it will be for each individual council to determine what it needs to do. The LGA have published guidance for Councils considering insourcing⁴⁰ which includes some recent case studies.

6.4 Impacts from facility closures

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.⁴¹

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. A number of respondents highlighted that this equipment was being located in sports halls, squeezing activities like badminton, with worrying implications for the future of those sports affected; and for equalities, as these sports are often more popular with ethnic minority groups.

⁴⁰ A guide to the emergency insourcing of leisure services available at <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/guide-emergency-insourcing-leisure-services>

⁴¹ District Councils Network Ibid

Sport England research demonstrates that the social value generated by leisure centre⁴² 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.

Alongside these issues our consultation revealed a number of further drivers for these potential closures. Financial pressures from the pandemic are very significant, with the majority of providers reporting that they have used up their existing reserves, while funding from the National Leisure Recovery Fund has also been exhausted and other pandemic support measures are ending.

This is compounded by uncertainty about the speed at which customers will return and the impacts this will have on the shape and delivery of services, especially in poorer communities where there is less opportunity for high income generating activities. Data from Sport England suggests that through put at public leisure facilities is currently at 66.47 per cent of the 2019 pre-pandemic level, and down from the 76.52 per cent seen in May 2021, when indoor group exercise returned.⁴³ **People aged 55 and over, those with long-term health conditions or illnesses and people from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to not have returned to activity since restrictions were eased and then lifted.** This poses the potential widening of health inequalities for those groups as well as financial challenges over the immediate to medium term for services.

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 or to address the need for capital investment in refurbishing or rebuilding local authority 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 be rebuilt from scratch. Urgent capital investment is needed if the requirement for more funding in the future is to be avoided, since there is a clear correlation between underinvestment and an increase in day to day running cost and loss of income.

6.5 A need for 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 be rebuilt from scratch. Urgent capital investment is needed if the requirement for more funding in the future is to be avoided.

Whilst these challenges are not new for the sector they have been amplified by the pandemic. Public sport and leisure services were already in need of major capital investment whilst at the same time the sector needs revenue investment if it is to better reach out to those communities and people that would most benefit from these services.

⁴² Moving Communities available at MC_SRA_04_Social Value_04b_alt1 (movingcommunities.org)

⁴³ Ibid

Research by Sport England prior to COVID-19 showed nearly two thirds of leisure facilities are more than 10 years old and require refurbishment and nearly a quarter of all sports halls and swimming pools have not been refurbished in more than 20 years.⁴⁴ Many of these older properties are at immediate risk of closure, replacing these facilities could cost in the region of £1.5 billion further down the line. However, the replacement costs could be three times higher than this should the Passivhaus standard be adopted against the leisure estate, which although generating longer term savings in running costs is nevertheless a capital intense option at the point of replacement.

The relentless focus on driving down costs through austerity, has been built very much on those that can afford to pay, but it has created a financial dilemma. The sectors' ability to both widen the reach of services as well as to invest in the asset stock has now been significantly weakened. Furthermore, it has also exposed the sectors limited resilience in coping with market fluctuations, given the reliance on public fee-paying income. It also exposes challenges, especially in district councils where the returns on investment in health terms don't materialise within the district council budget. This also poses some dilemmas for the development of integrated care systems.

On a positive note, we know that investment in leisure centres can have a significant impact on achieving government carbon emissions targets. Leisure centres and pools often form a large proportion of the Councils overall carbon footprint and therefore investment would play a major part of their decarbonisation programme.

Given the pressures on budgets across all government departments this underlines the need for a considered national strategy, which provides for effective coordination of government departments to support the local provision of public sport and leisure services, and the needs of communities at a local level. One that recognises the value of public sport and leisure, the budgets available and the possible impacts of these services failing or being lost in the immediate years ahead. The sector is realistic about how to progress. A properly considered local investment strategy, set against the future budget environment may well result in the loss of some facilities but having the plan in the first place is critical. The challenge however is incredibly difficult. Funding from home sports councils is welcome, however most councils recognise that long term sustainable funding is needed in practice if these essential local sports and leisure services are to survive.

6.6 Bridging health inequalities

COVID-19 has amplified health inequalities and public sports and leisure services can help to reduce the burden on the NHS and social care.

Public sport and leisure services contribute to multiple local priority outcomes. They can especially be used to reach out to those people and communities most adversely impacted upon by COVID-19. By embracing an inclusive, place-based approach to driving up levels of physical activity, public sport and leisure services can powerfully support local initiatives to build back better and assist in the economic and social rebuilding of our local communities.

We know that there have been stubborn inequalities when it comes to participation in physical activity, especially within the more deprived communities often significantly, where fewer opportunities and the pressures of everyday life adversely impact on people's ability to take part.

We also know from Sport England active lives survey 2020⁴⁵ that lockdowns have had a disproportionate impact on other parts of our communities, for example those people from more ethnically diverse backgrounds of those with a disability. This was an area where our respondents felt strongly about with around 66 per cent citing tackling inequalities including inclusion and diversity a key driver of sport and physical activity development and provision of leisure centres.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Active Lives Survey Data Sport England available at <https://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives/active-lives-data-tables>

Based upon Sport England's Active Lives survey, 2020, The **Sporting Equals Active Lives Adult Survey, Corona Report (2020)** showed that lockdown had a disproportionately negative impact with activity levels (of at least 150 mins a week) dropping within those specifically from Asian (14%), Black (14.2%), Chinese (13%) and Other Ethnic (17.9%) backgrounds. Drops in activity levels compared to the same period in 2019 indicates that these communities will have been likely to have found it harder than ever to find new ways to stay active during this third national lockdown.

Again, using Sport England's Active Lives survey (2020) the charity Activity Alliance has also expressed major concerns that the pandemic has set back a lot of positive work that had been put in place to help disabled people be more active. "Covid-19 has reversed progress made in levels of activity among disabled people".⁴⁶ The survey found that before the onset of Covid the number of disabled people who said they were physically inactive had fallen to 34%, down from 41% the year before. This corresponded with an 18% rise (from 40% to 58%) in the share of those who said they had "the opportunity to be as physically active as they want to be". Following Covid, however, that number has fallen back to 39%, with the need to self-isolate the most common reason given, alongside a fear of contracting the virus.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has created even greater challenges for the public sport and leisure sector but in turn it also further underlines the direction it needs to take in order to help those people in their local communities who might need support the most. 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 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.

This underlines the need for councils to take a strategic and data driven approach to making decisions about the future of services. (see Fig 2)

⁴⁶ Activity Alliance available at <https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/how-we-help/covid19>

6.7. Creating an active place for everyone should be a public policy priority

The wider case for physical activity is compelling with considerable evidence of the physical, mental and societal wellbeing impacts of embracing a holistic place-based approach to supporting more people to be physically active.

Physical activity (from William Bird: Intelligent Health)⁴⁷ is a means to:

- A healthier place to live
- A better place to live
- A stronger local economy

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic a paper produced by the Local Government physical activity partnership (LGPAP)⁴⁸ in 2019 underlined these points further, showing how by embracing a more active place it can help with community renewal (and therefore COVID-19 response), supporting many of the key strategic priorities often seen across Councils strategic plans.

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"⁴⁹ 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 report⁵⁰ whereby adopting the principles of Universal Proportionality can help extend the reach of services to those most in need of support, especially relevant in a post COVID-19 world.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) have produced a Global Action Plan for Physical Activity 2018-2030.⁵¹ This WHO guidance illustrates the breadth of the approach to physical activity, within which public sport and leisure can define its' role. These influences further help the framing of public sport and leisure services.

The WHO paper sets targets to reduce world Physical inactivity by 10% by 2025 and 15% by 2030 using:

- Active Societies (social norms and attitudes/what people see)
- Active Environments (spaces and places)
- Active People (programmes and opportunities)
- Active Systems (governance/policy enablers and collaboration)

The four pillars to the WHO guidance are themselves very helpful tools in developing local physical activity strategies. Building upon this WHO global plan the International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH) published "Eight investments that work for physical activity" which can be used to clearly show potential interventions and touch points within which public sport and leisure services can play an important role, e.g. Sport and recreation for all, community wide programmes, whole out of school programmes, public education, including mass media.

Importantly the guidance underlines that there is no single simple way of driving up physical activity levels. Instead it recognises the complex interrelationship of factors that often cut across areas of responsibility and accountability between statutory partners. With a very strong emphasis on

47 <http://www.intelligenthealth.co.uk/prevention-is-best-medicine/>

48 Community Leisure UK <https://communityleisureuk.org/news/why-an-active-community-needs-to-be-at-the-heart-of-renewal/>;

49 ibid

50 Available through the Institute of Health Equity <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/>

51 Global Action Plan for Physical Activity 2018-2030

collaboration all eight interventions are listed below and more details can be found on the ISPAH website⁵²

International Society for Sport and Physical Health eight suggested interventions are:-

- Whole of School Programmes
- Active travel
- Active urban design
- Healthcare
- Public education including mass media
- Sport and recreation for all
- Workplaces

6.8 Health inequalities

During COVID-19 a number of equalities issues were thrown into sharp focus across, age, ethnicity, gender, deprivation and poverty. The results of ONS data⁵³, starkly reveals that during the first wave of the pandemic, the rate of death involving COVID-19 was highest for Black African males with 3.7 times greater of death than for the White British group of males, and was still 2.6 times greater as a risk for Black African women. This was closely followed by three times the risk for men of Bangladeshi backgrounds and 1.9 times greater for women within that group as well a risk of death for Black Caribbean men which is three times higher than other groups.

The situation does not fair much better for those living in the poorest areas. The Health Foundation response⁵⁴ to further ONS datasets cited that people who live in the poorest areas of the UK are 2.2 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than those in the better off areas.

The Health Foundation call for Government to address this by stating ‘Sadly, this is nothing new. In more ordinary times, the poorest among us were almost twice as likely to die on any given day than the richest. It was bad for your health to be poor before the pandemic; COVID-19 has made it even worse. Much ill health is avoidable.’

For those working within the local authority sphere of sports and leisure services these health inequalities are not new, but what the health pandemic has provided, is now a rich source of additional data, which closely explores and exposes, the links between inequalities and health outcomes.

Health inequalities are complex, as are the reasons that sit behind the alarming morbidity statistics of COVID-19. Public Health England⁵⁵ reported that the risk of death from COVID-19 increased by 90% in people with a BMI over 40. Therefore, a very direct way of addressing and protecting the risk of death is sport, physical activity and weight loss programmes. For these to work in the general population, the cost of a private weight loss club, or a private gym, should not be a factor in reaching out to those in need of public health interventions. Taking an ill-health prevention approach for example, in tackling obesity, makes for good sense when you explore the risk of death associated with obesity during COVID-19 but also good economic sense, when we consider the costs of hospitalisations, and sadly deaths associated with obesity.

52 <https://www.ispah.org/resources/key-resources/8-investments/>

53 ONS Data to 31 March 2021 available at

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvedthecoronaviruscovid19englandandwales/24january2020to31march2021>

54 The Health Foundation Response to ONS Data: August 2020 Available at <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/higher-covid-19-deaths-amongst-more-disadvantaged-groups-sadly-nothing-new>

55 Public Health England. Excess weight can increase risk of serious illness and death from covid-19. Public Health England 25 Jul 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/excess-weight-can-increase-risk-of-serious-illness-and-death-from-covid-19>

The health pandemic exemplifies why governments across the UK have a huge task to close these health gaps. Levelling up cannot be confined to economic factors alone, it must also apply to the health of the Nation. This means we must tackle the underlying causes of health inequalities and how they impact upon different groups in society.

The impacts of COVID-19 on our communities is increasingly worrying but provides an opportunity to illustrate how sport and leisure services can support these wider public policy outcomes.

6.9 Impact of unemployment and universal credit claimant increases

The Office for National Statistics found unemployment increased by 3.1% for 16-24 year olds, compared to 1.3% for the overall UK population during 2020⁵⁶. It increased by 3.7% for ethnic minorities and by 1.5% for disabled people.

Coupled with this analysis increases in Universal credit claimants supports the view that longer-term post COVID recovery, at a local level, will include support and services, to those newly unemployed or under-employed and in receipt of unemployment or in-work top up benefits. A total of 4.3 million new start claims for Universal Credit occurred between March 2020 and January 2021⁵⁷.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions statistical releases there were 290,000 starts to Universal Credit in the 5 weeks to 12 November 2020⁵⁸. This is a higher number of starts compared with July to October. In the five weeks to 12 November further lockdowns in England and Wales started.

There were 200,000 starts to Universal Credit in the 5 weeks to 14 January 2021, compared with 130,000 starts to Universal Credit in the 4 weeks to 9 January 2020. Between 13 March 2020 and 14 May 2020 (the first months of lockdown) there were 2.4 million starts to Universal Credit. Even as sections of the economy reopens some hard-hit industries may take much longer to recovery, continuing the trend of higher unemployment or higher under-employment.

Essentially those newly in receipt of benefits will be those in more need of local authority services and support. This will include for example, subsidised leisure activities, but equally an expansion in targeted support to avoid the associated unemployment impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Consequently, more innovative ways of reaching these groups and designing services to meet their needs will be required. This can help with employability.

6.10 An agenda for change: Universal Proportionalism as a social policy tool to meet the ambitions of 'levelling up'

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

⁵⁶ ONS Datasets available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/february2021>

⁵⁷ DWP Universal Credit Statistics Live updates at Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 14 January 2021 available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021>

⁵⁸ DWP [Ibid]

emerging strategies and reports such Sport England's new strategy "Uniting the movement"⁵⁹ 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"⁶⁰). They are also drawn from the Marmot report⁶¹ whereby adopting the principles of Universal Proportionality can help extend the reach of services to those most in need of support, especially relevant in a post COVID-19 world and as highlighted in a 'ten years on' update the Marmot Report⁶² which found that *'for part of the decade 2010-2020 life expectancy actually fell in the most deprived communities outside London for women and in some regions for men. For men and women everywhere the time spent in poor health is increasing'*.

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. As demonstrated earlier in the report long term systemic issues, financial challenges and barriers to the sector's recovery from the pandemic all need to be addressed with some urgency. However, to echo the sentiment of our respondents who were clear that with the right leadership, partnerships, coordination and investment at local and national level. 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, changes** to its finances and greater recognition of its strategic contribution to achieving wider policy outcomes.

59 Available at <https://www.sportengland.org/why-were-here/uniting-the-movement>

60 Available at <https://www.sportengland.org/blogs/people-and-places-introduction-our-story>

61 Marmot Report 2021 Available at <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>

62 Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On Ten years on <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>



7. 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, DLUHC 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 and social care 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, the unemployed and children and young people) 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 councils' 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. As a result, the

public leisure estate is not energy efficient **and currently accounts for between 10 to 40 percent of a 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 refurbish the leisure estate as a core feature of funds designed to deliver wider objectives on levelling up and/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."**

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.

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.

Further 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 from 77 per cent 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).

More than two million children missed the chance to go swimming during the lockdowns with five million lessons lost, most of which will have been school swimming sessions. Supporting this lost generation of swimmers must be a priority for all.

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

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 to drive up the attainment levels for learn to swim especially for the most disadvantaged.

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 and providers 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 2012 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 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. 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, alongside colleagues in leisure trusts and active partnerships is needed to ensure local opportunities can be seized and

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.

Conclusions

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.

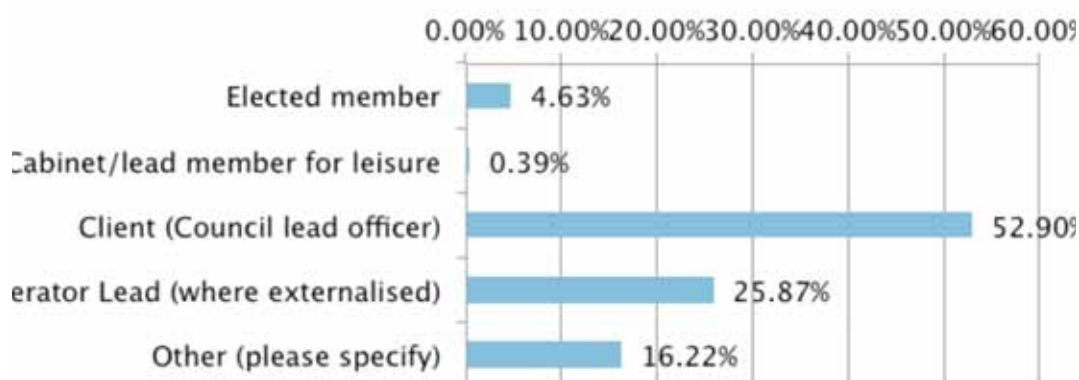
We will continue to extend an open offer to work with UK Government(s) and sporting bodies across the four nations as they develop policies and funding priorities

Appendix

Findings of the Leisure Survey

The Future of Local Authority Sports & Leisure 2021. APSE conducted the research over a 6 week period from mid-February 2021. In total the survey was answered by 260 respondents from across the UK

What is your role?



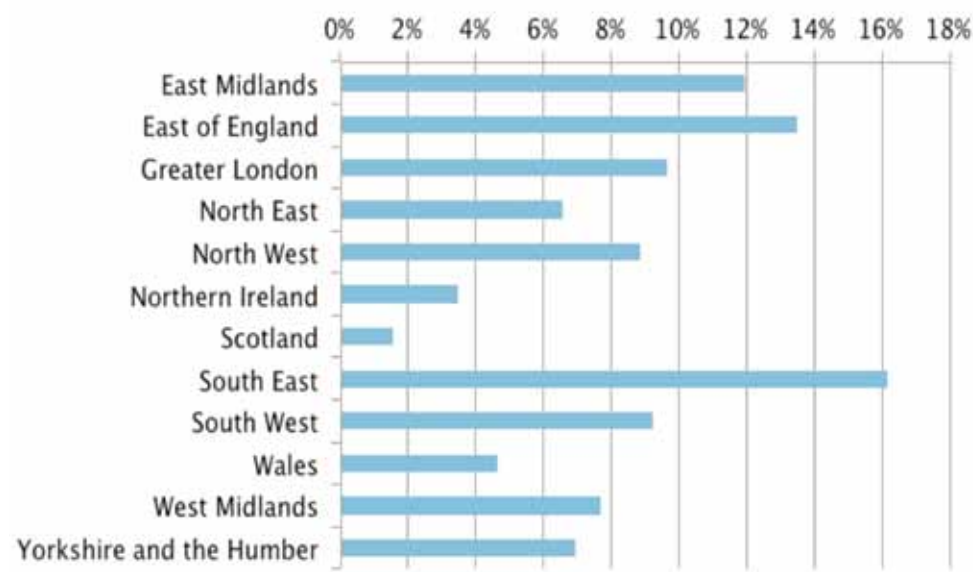
The majority of respondents (52.9%) were either lead officers for in-house services or clients where the service is externalised. Responses were also collected from elected members and leisure operators

What type of Authority is your employer/client?



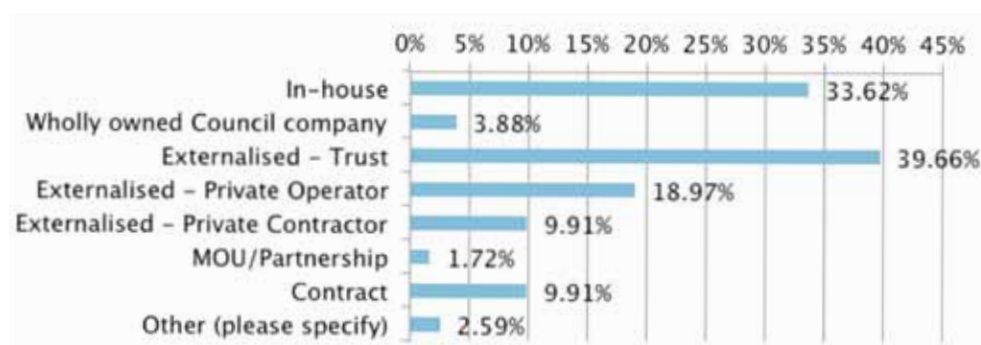
The majority of respondents (55%) worked for a Borough/District Council, whilst 27% worked for a Unitary, 10% for a London Borough and 3% for a County. This reflects a balanced representation of UK local Government.

Where in the UK do you work?



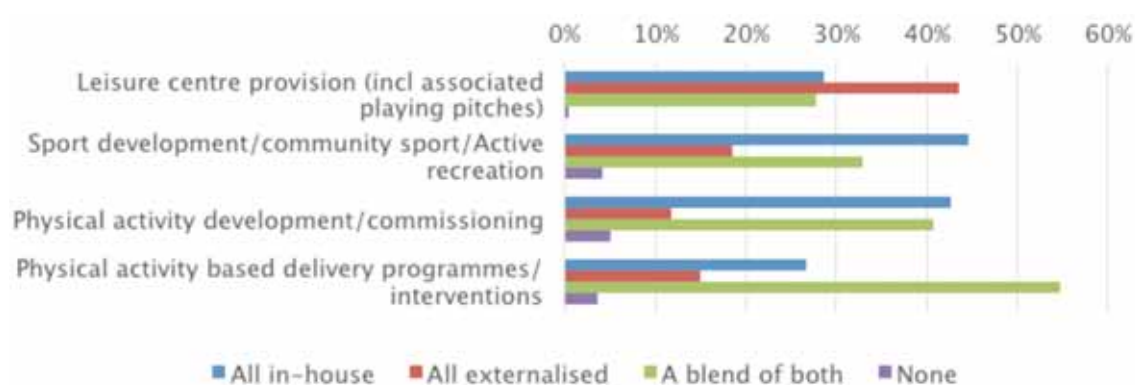
Respondents were UK wide with most in the South East.

How are you leisure centres delivered?



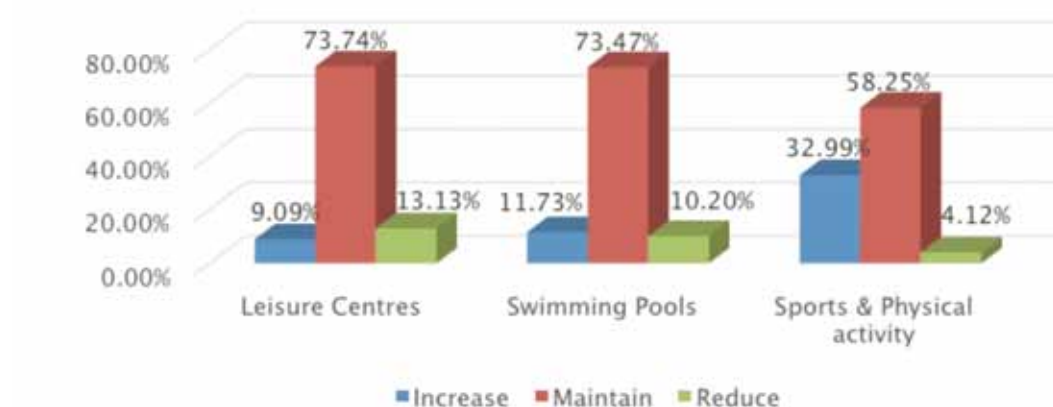
Leisure is delivered through a multitude of structures. In the survey the majority has an externalised Trust (40%) followed by in-house (34%) and a private operator (19%).

Who delivers your sport and leisure services?



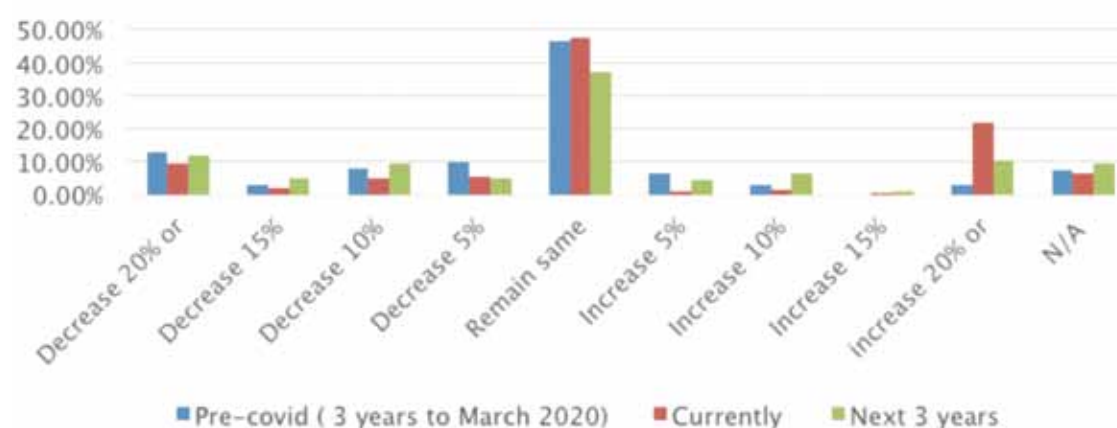
Overall, leisure centres were predominantly externalised, sport development mainly in-house, physical activity mainly in-house and intervention programmes mainly blended between in-house and other operators including charities.

Do you have any proposals to change the number of facilities/services?

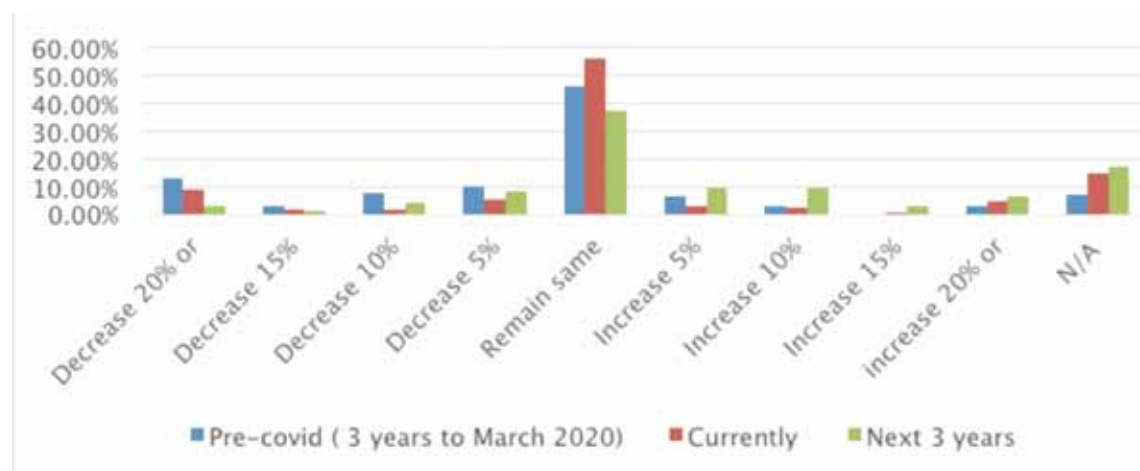


Around 74% had no plans to change the number of leisure centres and swimming pools. Of the remainder, roughly equal numbers planned both to reduce and increase the number of facilities. 33% planned to increase the level of sport and physical activity.

Please provide the direction of travel of leisure services

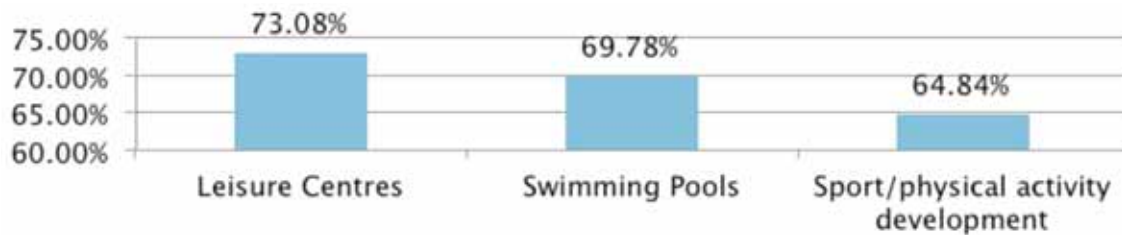


Please provide the direction of travel for sport/physical activity development



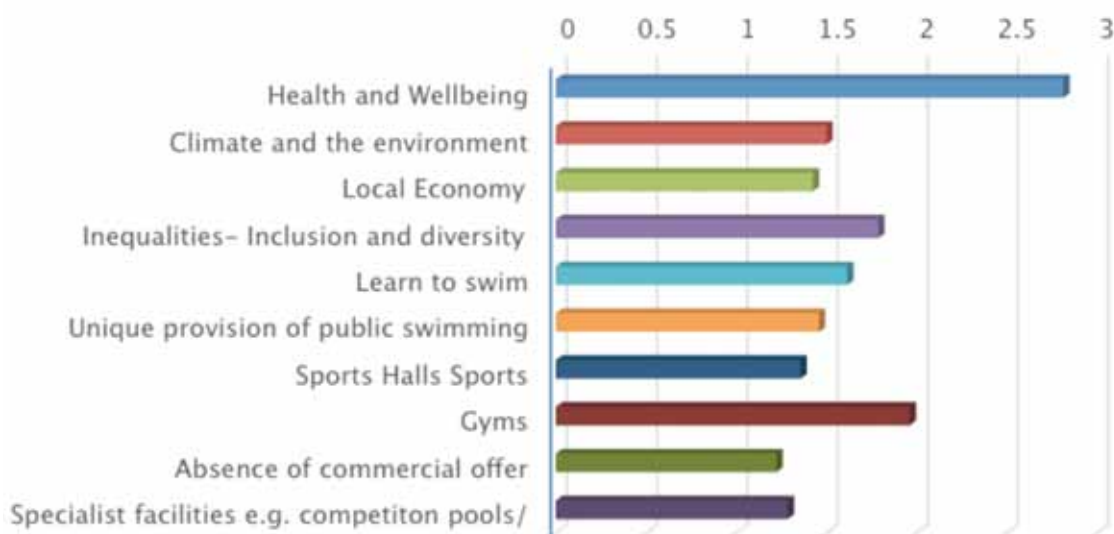
In the 3 years pre Covid-19, funding had remained the same or declined in most cases. During Covid year, funding has increased and people were optimistic that future funding would see an increase.

Is there a clear political understanding/written policy for the provision and support of sport and leisure services?



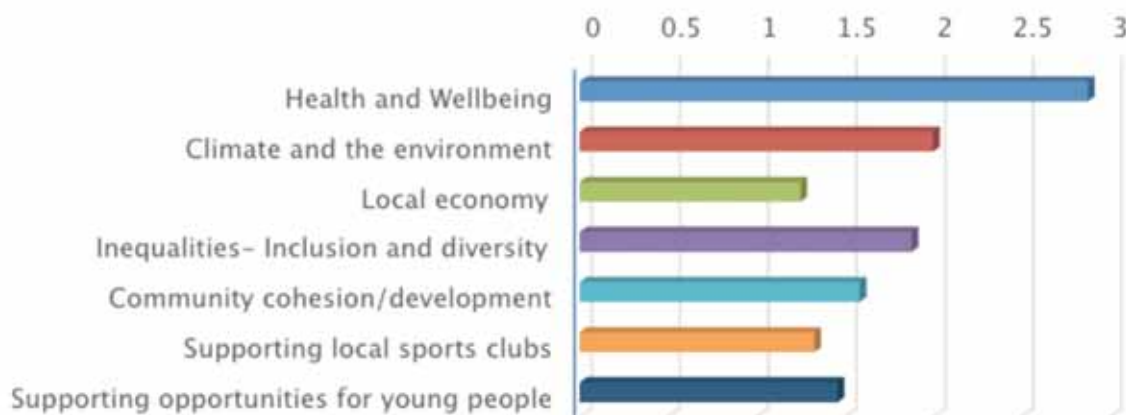
Most (73%) thought there was a clear political understanding/policy for provision and support of Leisure Services. Similarly 70% though the same for Swimming pools although 65% for physical activity.

Please tick the 3 main drivers for leisure centres



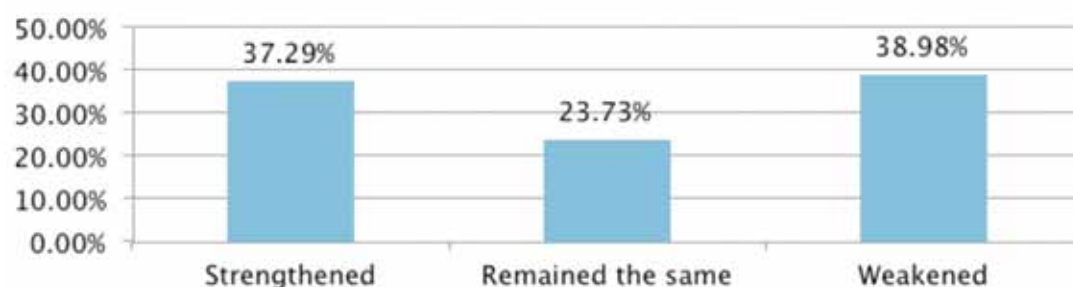
We asked the top 3 drivers for leisure centres, ranking the top as 3 and 3rd as 1. Health and wellbeing was cited most, followed by provision of gyms and in third came inequalities – inclusion and diversity

Please tick the 3 main drivers for sports/physical development



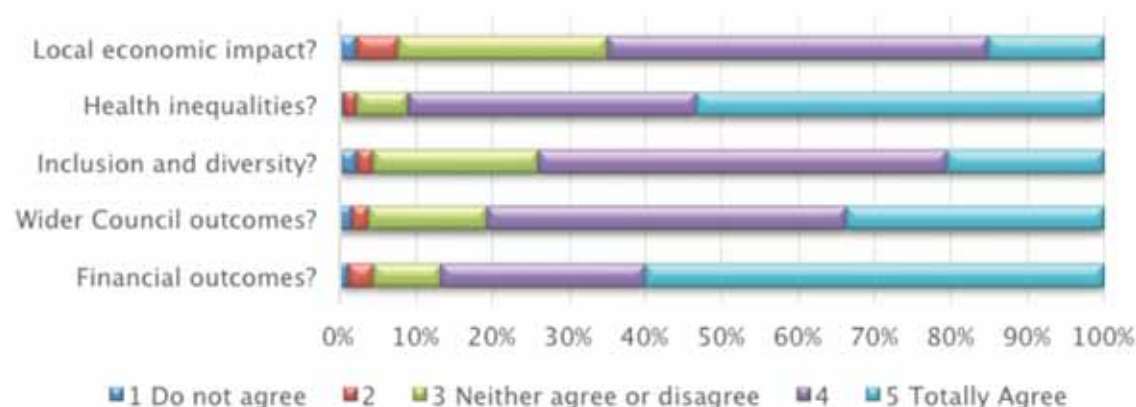
Asking the same question for Sports and physical development, Health & Wellbeing was cited highest followed by Climate and the environment and inequalities – inclusion and diversity

Do you believe the position of sports and leisure services has changed since the COVID 19 pandemic?



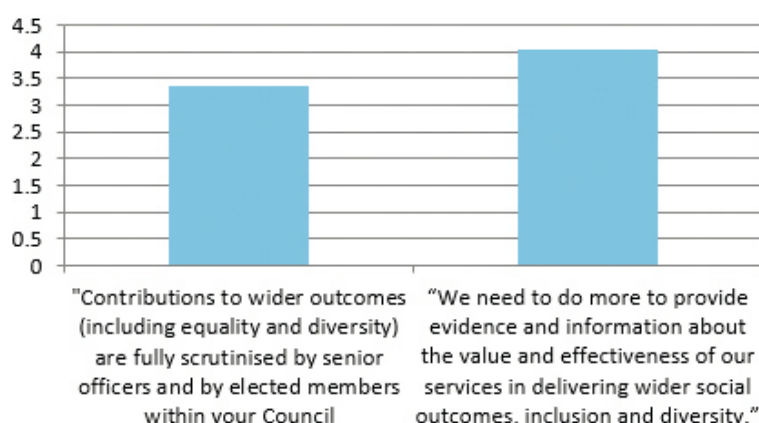
Interestingly similar number of people thought that sports and leisure services had been strengthened and weakened by Covid-19 whilst 24% thought it had made no difference.

What are the main drivers to ensure ongoing service viability?



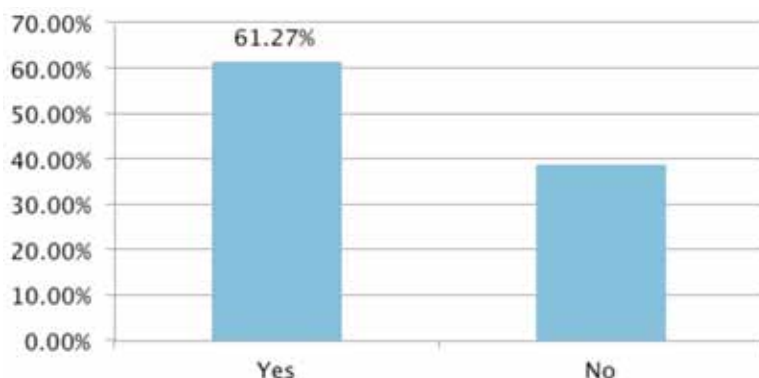
The main drivers for future service viability were Health inequalities and financial outcomes. Local economic impact was the least strong driver of those given.

To what extent to you agree with these statements?



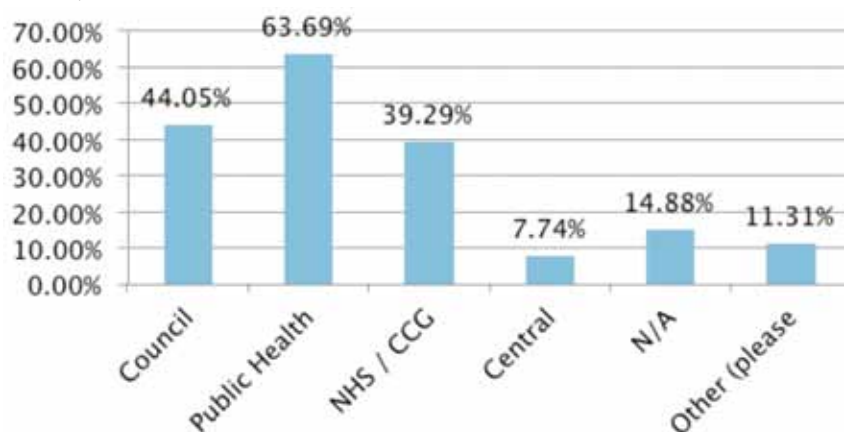
On average there was a weak agreement that there is significant scrutiny of leisure. Far higher was the agreement that more evidence of the value of the service is required

Are you commissioned to deliver health and wellbeing (including physical activity) programmes?



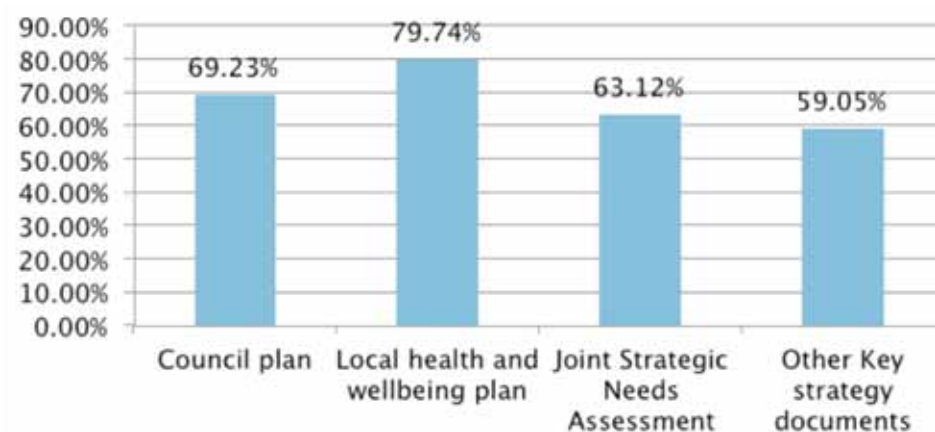
61% are currently commissioned to deliver an element of health and wellbeing programmes although 97% felt they had capacity to deliver more if funded to do so.

Who commissions health and wellbeing (including physical activity) programmes from you?



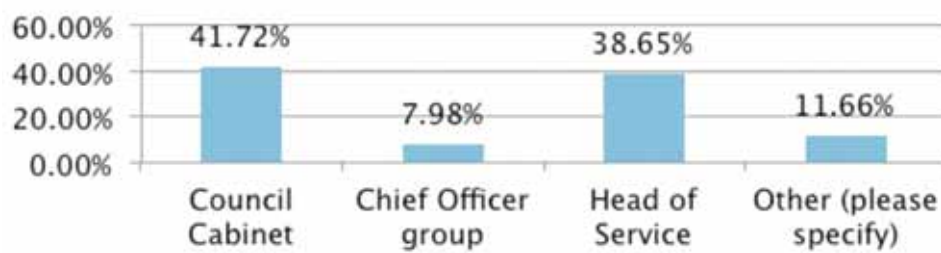
Current commissioners of health and wellbeing were led by Public Health at 64%, followed by the local authority of 44% and the NHS/CCG on 39%. Only 8% received funding from central government. A strong majority saw Sports & Leisure playing an important role in the recovery from Covid-19

Has your council a clear written policy position on increased levels of physical activity?



Most thought that their Council has a clear policy position on increasing levels of physical activity and 81% that addressing physical activity was a priority for the Council.

Where does the lead role for leisure sit?



Less clear was where the lead role for leisure sits, with 42% stating that it lay with cabinet and 39% the head of service. 79% think there is collaboration across the Council and partners when it comes to strategic development of physical activity. A slight majority thought that the relationship with Public Health and the wider Health networks was strong. Physical activity tends to be discussed more frequently in wider discussions than traditional sports and leisure services. 62% felt that wider work of physical activity was having an impact on the future shaping of local Sports and Leisure services.



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