

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a black tank top with a red and white trim, is lifting a barbell in a gym. She is looking off to the side with a focused expression. The background is a blurred gym setting with green weights and overhead lights.

# Future of public sector leisure

December 2022

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# 1. Foreword



**Public leisure facilities and services have a vital and unique role to play in our sport and**

**activity ecosystem because of their value to the people who use them most.**

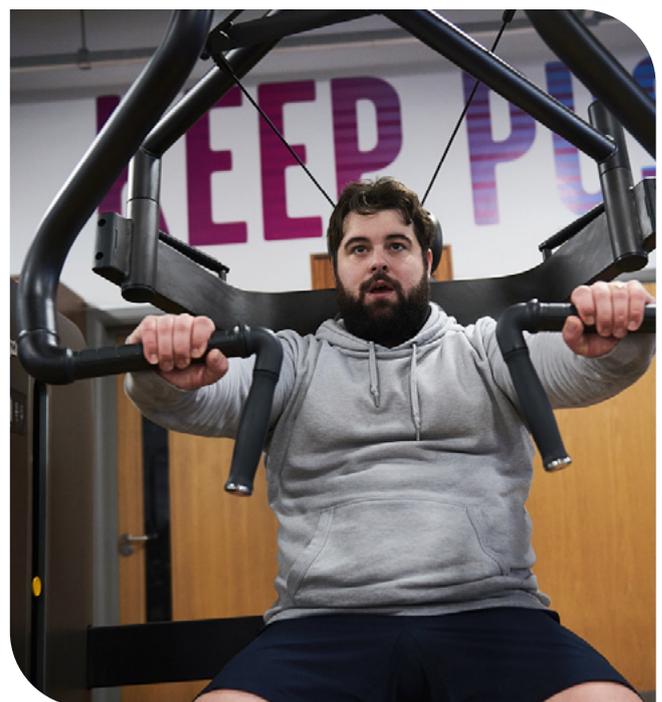
For decades, they have fed the next generation's love of sport and being active, supported those with health conditions through good days and bad, and connected us all to our communities in a friendly and local space.

However, months after the pandemic restrictions were lifted, participation levels at public leisure facilities have only partially recovered. Facilities have also had to battle rising energy costs, chemical shortages and challenges in maintaining the right levels of recruitment and retention of the workforce. However, the sector has come together to meet these challenges and, where possible, turn them into opportunities.

For Sport England, the public leisure sector also has a central role to play in the delivery of our Uniting the Movement strategy, as it is a core element of each of the five Big Issues we have identified as having the greatest potential for preventing and tackling inequalities in sport and physical activity.

The pandemic has accelerated the appetite for local authorities to look at leisure services and re-examine the purpose of their provision, assess whether they are delivering local community outcomes and consider their alignment with broader strategic outcomes, particularly health.

In the lead-up to this report, we supported and led workshops with a range of sector stakeholders to create a shared vision for the medium term. That group concluded that change is needed, and that collectively the focus should be on repositioning the traditional offer of public leisure into an active wellbeing service, doing more to create healthier and more active communities. The sector has already seen good examples of the shift in approach across the country but also recognises the need for national momentum.



The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the current landscape and summarise the conversations we have had with all our relevant partners in this space and our wider work engaging in this sector. This evidence has helped us map out the following shared medium-term goals for the public leisure sector:

- To transition from a traditional leisure service to one which is far more focused on active wellbeing.
- To move to a model that focuses on added value and supporting the delivery of key local priorities, and with that enable the delivery of wider government priorities around Levelling Up, net zero and health inequalities.

The report highlights the extensive support and resources deployed by a range of stakeholders that are already helping to evolve the service. It then discusses how these tools can deliver change on the ground and the importance of stakeholder collaboration in making progress.

The report also builds on 'Unlocking the Potential', another important report recently published by the National Sector Partners Group, which calls for reform and government action to support the growth and development of the sector.

We know the sector is in a fragile place and Sport England is committed to bringing together key stakeholders to promote increased partnership working that will provide cohesion and coordination of resources, with groups such as the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership already providing significant value in this space.

By providing this common agenda, we will help the sector move forward in a sustainable way with a service that meets the needs of modern users. Mutual accountability across partners will provide the culture required to safeguard the future of public leisure and provide it with a renewed sense of purpose.

Although Sport England is not a direct funder of public leisure services, it works closely with the sector in areas such as capital and revenue funding, by offering resources and guidance, and through investment in partners who rely on these spaces to deliver.

This report is the result of an excellent collaborative approach and forms the basis of a robust plan to unite these vital parts of our ecosystem. It sets out the first steps that must be taken to shift the sector's approach, and we look forward to continuing to support this important work.

**Tim Hollingsworth OBE**

Chief executive

## 2. Impact of Covid-19

**For many people sport and physical activity is not part of everyday life. Fewer than two-thirds of adults and less than 50% of children and young people meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for physical activity.**

Even more so now than before the pandemic, opportunities to get involved in sport and activity – and reap the rewards of being active – depend too much on your background, your gender, your bank balance and postcode.

The public leisure sector plays a critical role in the delivery of sport and leisure across England. It provides vital community assets, such as swimming pools, sports halls and pitches, that are part of the fabric of our villages, towns and cities. They provide widely accessible opportunities for local communities to get involved in sport and physical activity, meeting the needs of the people in the places where they live.



## Size of the public leisure sector

Before the Covid-19 pandemic there were:



**2,727**

leisure centres in England

Which includes:



**33%**

of all swimming pools



**20%**

of all health and fitness facilities



**13%**

of all sports halls<sup>1</sup>.



**17%**

of these were owned and operated by **61 local authorities**.



**83%**

were run by **84 different external operators**, with different contracts in place with their respective **267 local authorities**.



**10**

largest providers deliver services to **168 local authorities**, which make up **55% of all local authorities with leisure responsibilities**. The majority are not-for-profit organisations who operate on small margins and low liquidity ratios.



**68%**

of sports halls and swimming pools were **built more than 20 years ago**. Although more than **£150m was invested in the opening of new public leisure and swimming facilities in 2018/19<sup>2</sup>**, with another **£200m worth of assets in construction or planning** there remains significant levels of ageing public leisure stock.



**72%**

of all school swimming lessons took place in a public leisure facility, which included both the statutory learn to swim programme and the water safety curriculum across primary schools. Swimming club usage was also predominately based from public leisure facilities.

Covid-19 had a significant impact on the public leisure sector. Lockdown closures and significant social distancing measures stretched the sector almost to breaking point, threatening many providers with service reduction, or indeed closure.

1 Securing the Future of Public Sport and Leisure Services. A Report on Behalf of APSE, the LGA and CLOA; 2021. Accessed January 5, 2022. [https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Securing the future of public sport and leisure services Summary Report NEW\(1\).pdf](https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Securing%20the%20future%20of%20public%20sport%20and%20leisure%20services%20Summary%20Report%20NEW(1).pdf)

2 Mintel Report on Leisure Centres and Swimming Pools (September 2019)

## Impact on participation

Between April 2019 and January 2020, Sport England's Moving Communities service recorded the following engagement levels from a sample (793 providers) of all leisure centres across England:



**8.9**  
million participants



**165**  
million unique visits

However, participation between April 2021 and January 2022 showed the following reduction post pandemic across the same 793 leisure centres in England:



**5.8**  
million participants,  
a reduction of 35%



**112**  
million unique visits,  
a reduction of 32%

Even at its peak in October 2021, throughput was still lower than the monthly average in 2019 (13.2 million in October 2021 vs an average of 17.8 million in 2019).

- Recovery of participation levels across different activities has been imbalanced and has understandably leant towards those activities which deliver a faster return to pre-pandemic revenue levels.

However, the demographic profile of those participants remained relatively stable, with more public leisure facility users being female and from less deprived communities.



**53%**  
were female



**29%**  
were under 16



**8%**  
were over 65



**17%**  
were from the most deprived  
parts of the country (IMD 1&2).

Importantly, the 35% reduction in participation between April 2021 and January 2022 has been significant in terms of the wider social value experienced by individuals and communities..

Research commissioned by the Government and conducted by the [Sheffield Hallam University Sport Industry Research Group](#) confirms that being physically active has a positive effect on physical and mental wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, social and community development and individual development.

A total of £549 million of social value was generated by participants undertaking consistent activity at leisure facilities reporting to Moving Communities between April 2021 and January 2022<sup>3</sup>; this is significantly less than the £910 million recorded by the same centres for the same period pre-pandemic.

3 Sport England (2021) Moving Communities – based on data from 642 leisure centres

The research shows that this social value is attributable across the outcome areas shown in the table below:

Category	Apr-Jan 19/20 (Pre Covid-19)	Apr-Jan 21/22 (Post Covid-19)
Improved health	£153,570,440	£85,819,133
Improved subject wellbeing	£514,919,164	£314,741,639
Individual development	£7,156,249	£4,796,128
Community and social development	£235,163,770	£143,779,102

These lower participation rates were due in part to capacity restrictions imposed by social distancing measures, but also to lower consumer confidence in using these facilities post pandemic. However, there is also a positive correlation between the years since the last refurbishment of a site and its recovery, which should be taken into consideration.

Those sites refurbished in the last 10 years are seeing a throughput recovery of 68% compared with a recovery of 62% for those last refurbished 20 or more years ago, suggesting that investment in newer facilities creates spaces that have greater appeal, increase user confidence levels and provide a more relevant offer to meet current customer demands.



## Impact on financial performance

The pandemic also highlighted the financial fragility of the sector.

Virtually all of its income (94%) comes from customer fees and charges relating to the use of facilities, so Covid-19 closures followed by a reduced use of reopened leisure centres inevitably had a significant financial impact on operators. Data collected in order to administer the National Leisure Recovery Fund suggests that Covid-19 created a £505 million gap between income and expenditure for leisure operators<sup>4</sup>, with the subsequent 'Plan B' restrictions in December 2021 and January 2022 increasing this gap by £30 million.

Three significant parties reacted to help close this funding gap.

1. Local authorities invested a further £160 million to support the sector. On average this extra support has covered 40% of the additional costs of operating the service, although the average figure hides considerable variation between different authorities, with 38% of the support covering less than 25% of the deficit faced by operators and 18% covering more than 75%.
2. The National Leisure Recovery Fund provided by DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) and DLUHC (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, formerly Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) invested £100 million to support the reopening of leisure services in 266 local authorities after the pandemic. This support provided vital stimulus to the market, reducing the deficit and boosting confidence while also encouraging the reopening of services that deliver the greatest community benefit.
3. Leisure operators drew on £171 million of reserves to ensure that facilities and services could remain operational.

The major contributions outlined above, alongside further relief measures such as the Government's furlough scheme, helped to avert significant damage to the sector and enabled the additional costs of maintaining public assets and reopening services to be met.

However, these funding sources were finite and have now been virtually exhausted, and the sector is emerging from the pandemic in a particularly fragile state. At best, financial pressures risk limiting the ability of stakeholders to deliver against their commitments; at worst they may result in the permanent closure of some services or facilities.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this does not include the 19% of local authorities that deliver leisure services 'in-house'. Income for these services will have also fallen at a similar scale, although this will have been largely mitigated by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

# 3. Why does the public leisure facility sector matter?

**Public leisure facilities give local people access to vital community facilities and tackle inequalities in an affordable and accessible way. Put simply, the sector fulfils a vital public service that the free market is not incentivised to offer.**

Public leisure facilities, when designed well, provide an essential part of the ‘fabric of place’ and an important enabler for local communities to not just be physically active but to access a suite of co-located, broader public, social and health services – maximising the impact and value for money of service delivery and forming a core part of the 20-minute neighbourhood concept<sup>5</sup> that is gaining growing interest.

There will be a growing importance for local health collaboration, and the introduction of the integrated care systems (ICSs) to reduce health inequalities and maximise prevention is vital. As part of this, the role of social prescribing has increased, which highlights the role of other sectors in delivering services that promote wellbeing.

The profile and prominence that has been given to health and wellbeing will also be integral to positioning a service that is relevant to individuals. From the Government’s guidance around amounts of exercise that should be taken in lockdown to broader discussions on workplace wellbeing, this focus will have important implications for customer demand and how public leisure facilities can support the wider population’s health and wellbeing.

The decision-making process which drives consumer behaviour is complex and rarely driven by one single issue, but rather by the interplay between factors such as value, price, health and convenience. Issues such as sustainability and climate change are drivers of behaviour, but factors such as price and value are likely to remain the strongest drivers of consumers’ capabilities and motivations to take part in physical activity.

Marrying environmental considerations with these practical factors will be vital to the emergence and adoption of green initiatives. The public leisure sector has the potential to remedy a wide range of societal issues, making it uniquely placed to connect into and work alongside a range of other sectors to drive and influence positive action.

<sup>5</sup> See [The 20-minute neighbourhood - Town and Country Planning Association \(tcpa.org.uk\)](https://www.tcpa.org.uk)

## Why does the public leisure facility sector matter to wider agendas?

- Activity taking place in public leisure facilities makes a significant contribution to the participation theme of the DCMS's Single Departmental Plan<sup>6</sup>, as it plays a critical role in "[increasing] participation in, engagement with and access to sport and physical activity". It also plays – through its focus on ensuring equality of access and a broad geographical spread of provision – an important role in the delivery of 'priority outcome 4'<sup>7</sup>: "[enhancing] the cohesiveness of our communities and nations including through major events and ceremonial occasions, and reduc[ing] inequalities of participation in society, particularly among young people."
- The public leisure facility sector also positively contributes towards the Government's overarching agenda to 'build back better' in response to Covid-19, not only by protecting jobs and supporting local economic activity, productivity and social value, but through the activities it delivers as a key component of the Covid-19 response in terms of enabling and supporting policy interventions focused on healthy and active lifestyles<sup>8</sup>.
- Public leisure facilities provide a place-based infrastructure through which services and support can be delivered across the most deprived communities in England to support the Levelling Up agenda. In addition, health inequalities often underpin the deprivation that affects people (including future generations) and places. Sport and physical activity also have a vital role in addressing a broad range of physical and mental conditions, and in doing so positively contributing to individual health and wellbeing by helping to deliver local health and care priorities. There is also a growing body of evidence that the quality of physical infrastructure – of which sport and leisure facilities are a key part – is a significant factor in determining a local community's prosperity, sense of belonging and pride of place<sup>9</sup>. The public leisure sector can therefore make a positive contribution to four of the six capitals (physical, human, social and institutional) that the Levelling Up White Paper has identified as important factors to address in order to reduce inequalities and restore local pride<sup>10</sup>.

6 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-digital-culture-media-and-sport-single-departmental-plan/dcms-single-departmental-plan-2019>

7 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-digital-culture-media-sport-outcome-delivery-plan/dcms-outcome-delivery-plan-2021-to-2022>

8 See Professor Chris Whitty calls for physical activity to play key role in nation's recovery and future | ukactive

9 See '[Left behind' areas missing out on community facilities and places to meet – Local Trust](#)

10 See [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1052706/Levelling\\_Up\\_WP\\_HRES.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf)

- Public sector leisure facilities and services help the NHS to focus on reducing health inequalities, and maximise prevention<sup>11</sup> by enabling people to stay healthy while also moderating demand on the NHS. More generally, the public leisure sector has begun to demonstrate the critical preventative role it can play across a range of health conditions including diabetes, cancer and mental wellbeing. Physical activity can also support secondary prevention for people with different acute and complex needs. And most importantly, it can play a role in rehabilitation and recovery, which further alleviates pressures across the NHS.
- For Sport England, the public leisure facility sector also has a central role to play in the delivery of its Uniting the Movement strategy, as it is a core element of each of the five Big Issues. These issues have been identified by Sport England as those where the greatest potential lies for preventing and tackling inequalities in sport and physical activity: recover and reinvent; connecting communities; positive experiences for children and young people; connecting with physical health and wellbeing; and active environments.



<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/online-version/>

## 4. A shared vision for the public leisure facility sector

**This report is being published at a critical time. The pandemic has driven the public leisure facility sector to a crossroads.**

While the immediate pressure created by the Covid-19 pandemic has been alleviated through a concerted, sector-wide effort, the reduced revenues resulting from the plateau in participation levels along with increasing expenditure around utilities and staffing have put pressure on both sides of the sector's profit and loss statements. The resulting fragility of the sector increases the risk of service reductions and closures.

This has stimulated important questions about what the scale, nature and approach should be to make future service delivery better placed to meet the needs of communities. Multiple stakeholders have come together to debate this and agreed that change is required.

There is consensus that competition for contracts needs to focus on outcomes rather than costs to create a sustainable model that achieves the sector's full potential to deliver economic and social value to the local economy.



## Why does the public leisure facility sector matter locally?

This report shares our common agenda, one that will provide a direction of travel for the sector to move forwards.

**// We will evolve the sector, transitioning from traditional leisure services into an active wellbeing service.**

This vision is built on four inter-related foundations:



The commitments coalesce around seven broad themes:



There is already strong stakeholder support to enable change. This report compiles commitments from a range of stakeholders within the sector as to how they are, and will be, working to build these foundations in order to facilitate and foster the change. This report will support local communities and, in turn, help deliver against key government priorities.

Mobilising and realising this ambition in the context of rising energy prices, plateauing participation and recovery levels, the impact of rising payroll and supply chain costs and ongoing financial constraints across local authorities is a serious challenge.

A balance will need to be struck between a concerted effort to enact this change and enabling the required investment and resources to move beyond short-term financial pressures to a more sustainable footing. Innovation of the scale required will therefore need collaboration at both a national and local government level, as well as from the myriad of stakeholders working across the sector to assess how investment could be stimulated. Sport England will undertake work in this area.

However, this new approach will develop new products and services that, coupled with investment in a physical estate that delivers against the dual goals of energy efficiency and creating community hubs that enable wider service provision, have the potential to ensure that the sector is more resilient and effective than ever before. These new products and services will also make a significantly positive contribution to the Government's economic, societal and environmental priorities.

The sector has articulated its shared ambition. Now is the time to turn this ambition into action.



## Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care

Given the existing alignment of priorities and desired outcomes between leisure, physical health, mental health and social care, there is a clear opportunity to establish a new model that helps to formalise this relationship. This could be defined by elements such as:

- Co-location – with refurbished or new leisure centres providing community hubs that combine traditional leisure services with other health and social care services and facilities. This is vital in areas of deprivation where a lack of access to services can significantly reduce activity levels.
- Consolidation of the sector’s role as deliverer of preventative activity – by ensuring that people are fit and healthy enough to participate fully in work. Those that are physically active have lower levels of absenteeism, greater efficiency, are less likely to suffer from stress or depression and are more productive<sup>12</sup>.



- Social prescribing and supporting local health and care priorities – with leisure services acting as a key delivery partner supporting general practice, pharmacies, multi-disciplinary teams, hospital discharge teams, allied health professionals, fire services, police, job centres, social care services, housing associations and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations<sup>13</sup> in the delivery of accessible and sustainable activities that support health and wellbeing. Of particular importance will be the role that prescribing leisure and physical activity can play in supporting the treatment of people with more complex needs.

To create an effective active wellbeing service, it will be vital that provision is not limited to physical assets and facilities, and that users are closely involved in the design and planning of both programmes and services.

To be truly effective, the service will need to play a key role in creating active environments within a place. This starts with dedicated sport and physical activity facilities, but it also includes utilising local assets (such as parks and green space, community centres and villages that, while not the focus of this report, are vital) as well as the wider built environment, with a particular focus on encouraging active travel.

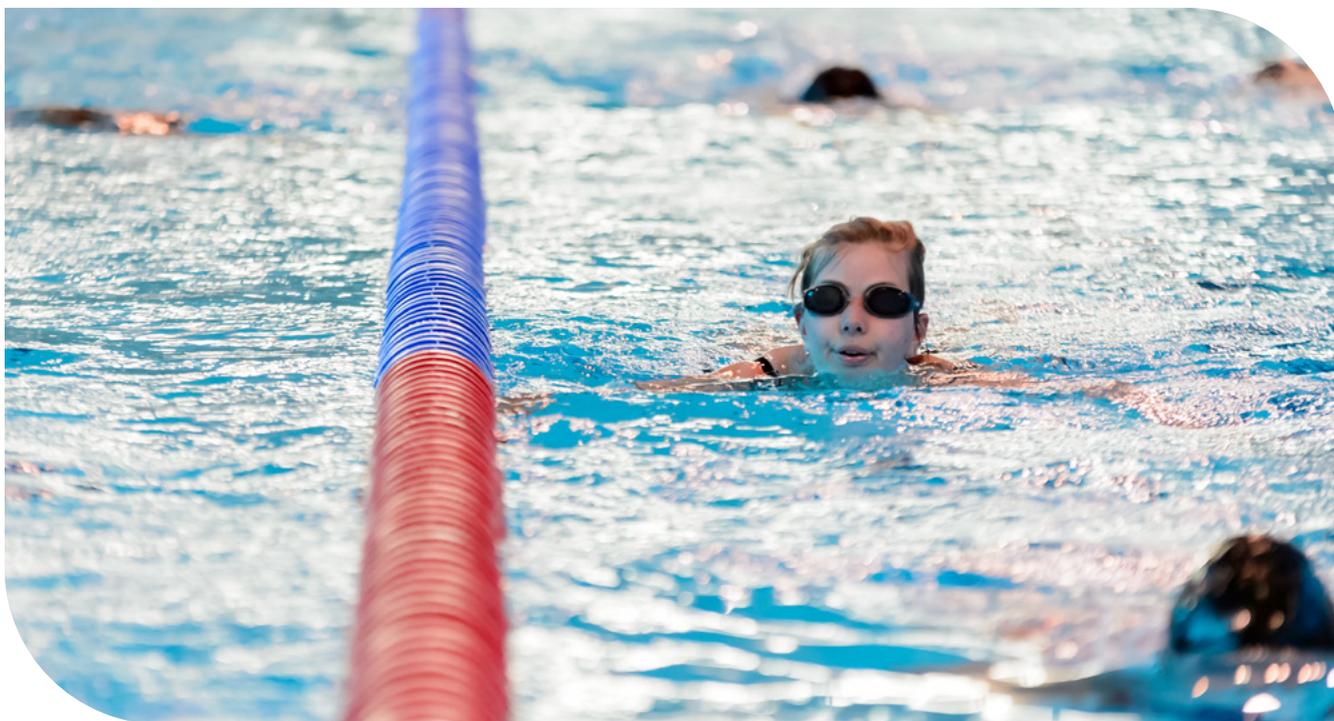
An effective active wellbeing service will therefore provide front-line provision that will directly narrow health inequalities between places – particularly when combined with a truly place-based agenda.

<sup>12</sup> Nuffield white paper report commissioned by Sport England in 2018

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>

The introduction of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) in April 2021 has provided an ideal opportunity to progress this placed-based conversation at pace. ICSs have a remit to act as “partnerships between the organisations that meet health and care needs across an area, to coordinate services and to plan in a way that improves population health and reduces inequalities between different groups”<sup>14</sup>. A public leisure sector that is fit for the 21st century will not only be ‘at the table’ for these local conversations but will play a key role in delivery and providing activities and services that help to reduce health inequalities and positively contribute to the Levelling Up agenda and the NHS Core20PLUS5 approach to reducing health inequalities<sup>15</sup>.

The District Council Network’s [Fit for the Future report](#) evidences the health economic value of leisure and wellbeing services, and the further impact they could potentially have on reducing health inequalities. The results show that improving physical activity, especially among the most deprived, should lead to a reduction in diseases (thereby saving the healthcare system the cost that would have been incurred in treating the diseases), improved quality of life and the associated economic returns (improved health means people can be more productive for longer), and a reduction in health inequalities (by reducing the gap in healthy life expectancy between the lower and higher social economic groups). It also estimates the potential reduction in NHS expenditure as a result. The report summarises that if the leisure sector can leverage its existing infrastructure and services to develop the skills and communication tools needed to engage inactive members of their communities, they can be the catalysts for this reduction of inequalities.



14 See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/integratedcare/what-is-integrated-care/>

15 See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/about/equality/equality-hub/core20plus5/>

Greater Manchester Health and Social Care system, working in partnership with GM Active, used a community leisure centre-based approach to deliver Prehab4Cancer, the first UK system-wide, multi-modal prehabilitation and recovery programme for cancer patients. It was designed to improve post-operative outcomes for patients across Greater Manchester (GM).

The evaluation shows that P4C is benefitting patients, providers, and systems:

- Patients are optimised prior to surgery and have long-lasting health benefits following post-operative rehabilitation. This reduces demands on healthcare services throughout the cancer pathway.
- Quality of life and physical activity improvements indicate long-term behaviour change and health improvement, with patients taking control of their care.
- Improvements are seen in both ward and critical care bed day usage, resulting in improved elective care capacity and effective use of resources. Additional positive impacts on 30- and 90-day re-admission and emergency department admissions have been observed.
- Efficiency improvements to pathways are visible which support delivery of elective care and cancer recovery plans, and achievement of cancer performance standards.
- Evidence that supports improved survival in patients who complete prehab. The colorectal patients who completed prehab were the largest cohort.

Headline results include:

- 1.5-day reduction in length of hospital stay per prehab patient
- 0.4-day reduction in critical care length of stay per prehab patient
- 550 ward bed days 'released'
- 146 critical care bed days 'released'
- Bed days 'released' from 1,000 colorectal prehab patients enable 179 additional patients to access timely surgical pathways.

The evaluation confirmed that the cost savings associated with the early release of beds per prehab patient cover the costs involved in setting up and delivering P4C for a year. Therefore, the programme has been recommissioned given it is sustainable on a recurrent basis.

## Strong sector leadership

The introduction of a new approach that brings forward new thinking, products and services will require proactive, skilled and diverse leadership at both local and national levels. The scale and nature of many of the challenges that sit at the heart of the Levelling Up agenda cannot and will not be fixed through traditional approaches and delivery models. Therefore, there is a clear need to develop leaders within the public leisure sector, broaden their diversity and hone the skills of those already playing a leadership role. This can be achieved through building on the work of the current local leadership programme with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the wider work of the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA), particularly through its Chartered Managers process. The CIMSPA process awards a badge of excellence to those who have demonstrated a real commitment and contribution to the sport and physical activity sector and have the leadership skills to drive and create positive change.

Leaders will need to invest time and energy in developing new skills and capabilities in the critical areas below to achieve the change and transformation we seek:

- data, insight and learning
- the practical application of innovation and digital to improve the experience of getting active
- translating good governance processes into delivery models and focusing attention on specific aspects of leadership such as diversity
- inclusion and putting distributed leadership concepts into practice.

Public leisure sector leadership will need to focus on two core areas initially:

1. Addressing the fragmented nature of the leisure sector. Fragmentation has limited the sector's ability to unite behind a common purpose, and hindered the sharing of best practice and innovation. Leaders need to address the transactional approach (particularly in the bidding for new contracts) which has stimulated a 'race to the bottom' and a focus on cost saving as opposed to added value and the delivery of outcomes. Creating and agreeing a common purpose for public sector leisure will help enable a move to a more relationship-led approach, which will in turn enable synergies, prevent agendas being overridden by other objectives, foster innovation and ensure that best practice is shared and implemented across the country – ultimately delivering greater value and improved quality of provision. This requires coordinated and committed cross-sector collaboration and shared leadership.
2. Building strong working relationships across multiple stakeholders. If the sector is to play a critical place-leadership role and create an active wellbeing service then leaders will need to effectively engage with multiple stakeholders, including public, private and third sector. This engagement will require leaders to: articulate a compelling vision at a local level; be clear about the costs and benefits, the provision in its entirety and the case for investment; persuade stakeholders to change existing behaviours and models; and show resilience, as change will take time. This will also require a commitment from stakeholders across the sector to help deliver change and a consistent measurement framework to understand that impact against local needs.

## Provision is place-based

The services of the leisure sector have predominately been provided via physical assets so it already has a widespread geographical footprint with a number of core community facilities. These facilities are spread over rural, urban and coastal areas, providing a variety of opportunities and challenges. The thinking behind this new model must therefore be based on this footprint and driven by two priorities.

The first is ensuring that health and wellbeing services are at the heart of local communities, and that the facilities and services provided contribute to fulfilling the needs of those communities. Any new investment in infrastructure must be considered and planned in this context to ensure the right interventions are delivered in each community. Recent work by the Town and Country Planning Association on “20-minute neighbourhoods”<sup>16</sup> and how to create “healthier, active, prosperous communities” is an important starting point. This work sees “community health and wellbeing facilities” as a core feature of the 20-minute neighbourhood where the objective is to create “places that include most of the things that most people need for their everyday lives within a short and pleasant walk or cycle ride”. It is an approach that is seen to deliver a range of economic, environmental, health and social benefits.

The opportunity therefore is to align both planned and new investment in leisure facilities to this broader agenda. To make leisure centres genuine neighbourhood hubs. To combine existing leisure facilities with broader health, cultural and community facilities. And to consider how they strategically complement wider assets, such as school and private facilities, to shape that place.

Warrington Borough Council and its provider of leisure, library and lifestyle services, LiveWire, worked closely with local stakeholders to transform the existing Great Sankey Leisure Centre into the Great Sankey Neighbourhood Hub, encompassing leisure, library, health and culture facilities. The Hub specifically focuses on providing services that support the area’s changing demographic with an increasing number of young families alongside the fastest-aging population in Warrington (for example, the Hub has been designed to ensure it is dementia-friendly).

16 TCPA (2021) 20-minute neighbourhoods

The second is the need to ensure that provision is aligned to the needs of the people that live in the immediate and surrounding communities and is both designed and ultimately provided in ways that seek to reduce inequalities and improve overall quality of life. This means taking more user-led approaches to understanding needs, co-designing elements of the provision, and ensuring that flexibility and agility are built in, so it can adapt and change with local needs. This approach will see provision both located where it is needed most and tailored to the specific needs of the local community – particularly in the alignment of services and other community-based facilities. User needs and feedback must drive the

provision, and data, insight and learning must be shared and used to adapt the model and experiences provided on a regular basis. A model that can deliver in this way will better meet the needs of those people and communities that will benefit from physical activity most. This approach will also require an increase in skills and capabilities to apply innovation, digital, data and learning, all critical factors required to deliver local community objectives and align with the Government's Levelling Up agenda.

Together these aspects of the new approach will place leisure at the heart of local communities.



## Provision that is low carbon

Alongside a place-based approach there is also an ambition to deliver a step change in carbon emissions at the local authority level. Estimates suggest that leisure assets currently account for between 10% and 40% of a local authority's direct carbon emissions<sup>17</sup>. Investment in and improvements to England's leisure estate therefore have the potential to make a notable contribution to the achievement of local targets and make a positive contribution at national level.

The efforts already being made by local authorities, via the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund, to invest in leisure facilities are starting to make this ambition a reality, but faster progress and increased investment are required to realise this in a timeframe that will make a notable contribution towards national and local net zero targets.



Giving people the confidence and ability to participate in active travel and connecting public leisure facilities up to cycle lanes and public transport will support wider strategic priorities in a place.

The challenges are the speed and scale with which this needs to occur and that it will increase energy costs in the short term, but in the long term this is an invest-to-save solution.

Exeter City Council has built the first super-energy-efficient centre (to Passivhaus standard), replacing a more-than-50-year-old swimming pool. This change is expected to save up to 70% on annual energy costs, use 50% less water, significantly reduce running costs and lower maintenance costs. Furthermore, it does not use chemicals which have been forcing facilities to close temporarily due to the lack of supply.

17 APSE, LGA and CLOA (2021) Securing the future of public sport and leisure services

# 5. Cross-sector commitment to support change

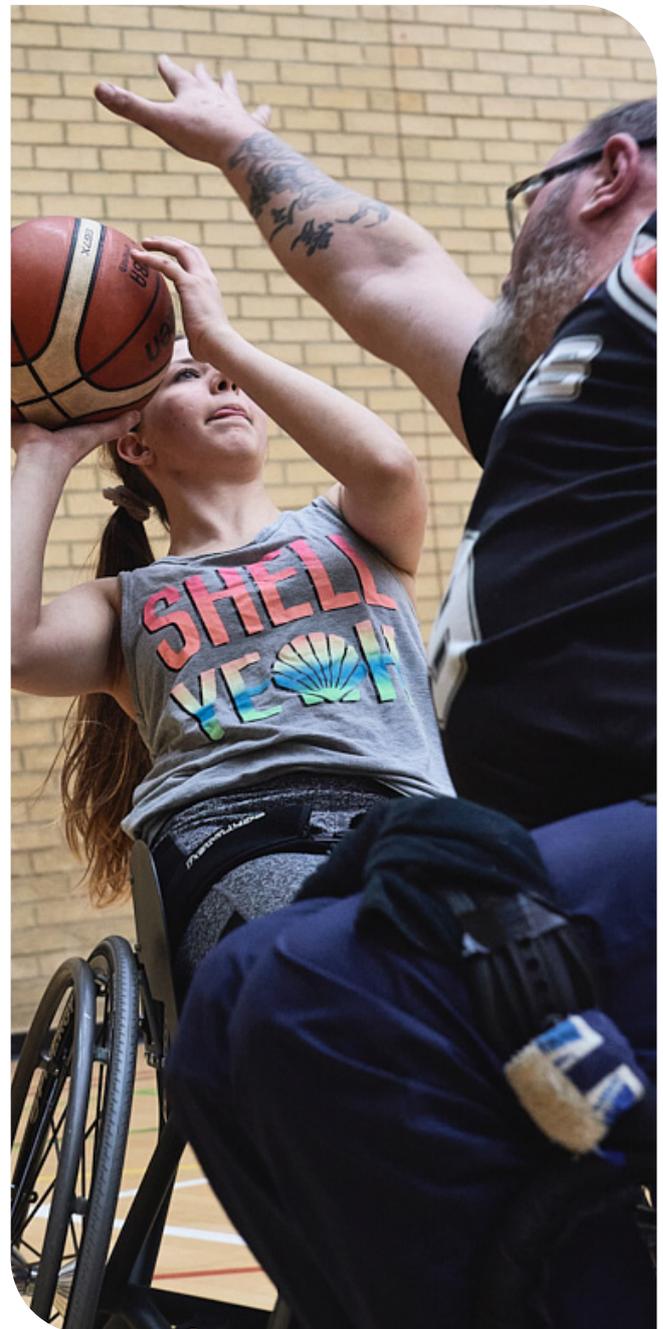
**This report reflects the sector's ambition to realise a shared vision via a new direction of travel.**

Stakeholders have shared a number of commitments to show how they are, and will be, working collaboratively to build the foundations for change and facilitate and foster the transformation.

The commitments coalesce around seven broad themes and cover a range of activities that will:

- provide support to services on the ground;
- strengthen the sector's leadership;
- facilitate innovation; and
- help to share best practice.

The commitments listed below detail the first steps on our journey for change. Stakeholders have made commitments to the timescales and reviewed alignment to the vision presented above. However, this is not a comprehensive list and will need to be refined and added to as implementation develops. The commitments will be tracked through regular communication and feedback.





**✓ High-quality data and insight**

A commitment to build the evidence base and intelligence around what works, why and the difference it makes to communities.

**✓ Coordination and partnerships**

A commitment to coordinate stakeholders and share information across organisations and geographical boundaries.

**✓ Leadership and workforce development**

A commitment to develop and deliver programmes to support the workforce at all levels both within local authorities and providers.

**✓ Champion equality, diversity and inclusion**

A commitment to training and change to embed diversity and inclusion across the full range of activities, services and communications – for both communities and the workforce.

**✓ Digital transformation**

A commitment to support the digital transformation of the sector through the development of a white paper, partnering options and maturity assessment.

**✓ Strengthen the connection to health**

A commitment to building partnerships at all levels including ICS and providing materials to support engagement (e.g. social prescribing handbook).

**✓ Environmental sustainability**

A commitment to improving awareness, owning good practice and supporting the transition to zero carbon facilities.



## High-quality data and insight

A successful and impactful sector requires a shared understanding of the people and systems that are part of it. It is only with rich insight that success and impact can be identified and communicated, opportunities for change identified and confident decisions about the future taken.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
<p>Sport England will continue to support and develop our Moving Communities product to provide quality, consistent and comparable live data on participation, finance and customer experience. This will include dynamic calculations that articulate the wider impact of leisure centres on social outcomes and local priorities, including health and wellbeing, at a facility level and how they will positively impact the public purse and make a genuine difference in helping deliver against government’s key priorities. This work includes a commitment to continuous improvement in both the quality and integrity of data gathered, as well as developing capabilities within the sector to better understand and use its own data.</p>	<p>In place currently with a commitment up to 2025</p>	<p>Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care</p>
<p>The District Council Network has commissioned a report that evidences the health economic benefits of leisure services and their potential to engage inactive community members in physical activity.</p>	<p>In place currently with an associated campaign to run to 2025</p>	<p>Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care</p>
<p>Sport England will collaborate with government on a national facility audit. This will: inform the extent of investment needs; shape thinking around the number, location and type of facilities that exist within places; and provide data on the scale of the net zero challenge. This information – alongside the Moving Communities data focusing on usage, service delivery, wider social impact and financial performance – will arm decision makers with the intelligence they need to make informed strategic decisions around future investment.</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>Strong sector leadership</p>



## High-quality data and insight

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
Community Leisure UK will carry out regular surveys with members to provide accurate and up-to-date information on the landscape for leisure trusts and emerging risks and challenges, and to support members by sharing best practice.	2022	Strong sector leadership
Sport England is encouraging partners to use best-practice open data standards where relevant, including publishing and using data according to these standards, as well as cooperating and collaborating in the development, adoption and maintenance of the data standards for the sport and physical activity sector. Relevant industry best-practice data standards include but are not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. OpenActive data standards;</li> <li>b. 360Giving data standards;</li> <li>c. Active Places data standards;</li> <li>d. OpenReferral data standards;</li> <li>e. Any other industry standard data standards.</li> </ul>	Included in system partner funding agreements to 2025	Strong sector leadership  Place-based
Activity Alliance will assist with content development and data capture in relation to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions to ensure that inclusion is embedded within continuous improvement and strategic decision-making.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
The Association of Public Service Excellence's (APSE's) Performance Networks Benchmarking Service will engage with Moving Communities to align datasets	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
UK Active will introduce the Active Standard to apply and quality assure the appropriate standards necessary to support the continued professionalism of the physical activity sector.	2022-23	Strong sector leadership
UK Active's Research Institute will continue to provide high quality research, evaluation, and business intelligence services that achieve sector, policy, and academic impact through two key functions; Data and Insight, and Research and Evaluation.	2022-23	Strong sector leadership



## Coordination and partnerships

By working collaboratively across places and organisations there are greater opportunities to share best practice, influence and shape policy priorities and articulate the benefits of the sector

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
The Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) will continue to share information and coordinate and chair the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership and in doing so empower local government agencies to work collaboratively to improve and articulate the social and economic value of the sector.	Ongoing	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care  Place-based
Activity Alliance will continue to support a wide range of national, regional and local partners and networks, enabling organisations to be more effective in enabling provision to be more accessible and inclusive.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
UK Active will deliver a broad range of reports and services that will help to drive thought leadership within the sector and raise its profile in relation to key initiatives.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
UK Active will utilise its networks to bring together key sector leaders locally to enhance relationships and partnerships, which will support a whole systems approach to physical activity. They will work with other key partners to develop clear deliverables to avoid duplication and drive efficiency and effectiveness.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership  Place-based
APSE will fund and deliver research into the sector and provide and facilitate regular sector events and networks to share best practice.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
Active Partnerships is developing a deep understanding of communities, especially in relation to tackling inequalities, and will connect leisure providers to the local community organisations working in these areas.	2022-2025	Place-based



## Coordination and partnerships

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
Sport England will explore and analyse the opportunities for attracting alternative investment into the sector and consider how service delivery requirements need to evolve so they can be both sustainable and community outcome focused.	2022/3	Place-based  Strong sector leadership
Sport England will continue to support local authorities through resources, guidance and access to consultancy via the Active Environment Framework to develop provision that's planned strategically, linking effectively across health and community issues, and has effective contract management in place to drive wider outcomes and positive behaviours.	2022-2025	Place-based  Strong sector leadership
Sport England will continue to support investment into facilities through place-based work into priority areas in line with Uniting the Movement.	2022-2025	Place-based  Strong sector leadership

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## Leadership and workforce development

Investing in the sector’s workforce and leaders will provide the capability and capacity to deliver change at the scale and pace that is required.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
CLOA will facilitate a range of learning seminars with local authority sector leaders on key issues facing the sector as it transitions. It will also share good practice and innovation to promote a strategic approach.	Ongoing	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care  Strong sector leadership  Place-based  Low carbon
Activity Alliance’s training workshops and resources will empower activity providers with practical tools and creative ideas to get more disabled people active.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
The LGA will develop and deliver a programme of high-quality leadership development to support senior officers and portfolio holders as they seek to support and champion the service and help align it to wider strategic objectives for health.	2022	Strong sector leadership  Place-based
Community Leisure UK will develop and deliver a bespoke leadership training course for members, with a focus on social business, place and partnerships, to complement existing leadership training offered within the sector.	2022	Strong sector leadership
CIMSPA will support the recruitment in the sector through tailored support packages and training opportunities, as well as working with employers to support and retain the existing workforce.	2022-2023	Strong sector leadership
Active Partnerships will work with local organisations to support workforce needs through strategic planning, connecting with education providers and developing bespoke workforce development programmes.	2022-2025	Strong sector leadership
UK Active will ensure its public sector members are engaged fully in this work and commit to working collaboratively with other key partners to avoid duplication.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership



## Champion equality, diversity and inclusion

The future sector needs to be one that champions diversity and inclusion and provides opportunities and access for all.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
Activity Alliance will share insight and expertise with leisure sector partners to increase understanding and focus resource on tackling inequalities. This will help to embed inclusive practices into organisations, change attitudes and close the fairness gap for disabled people in sport and activity.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
Community Leisure UK will deliver workshops on relevant EDI topics for members, identifying areas for more in-depth work in line with their EDI Action Plan. This will address issues of diversity both in the workforce and with regard to users and discuss solutions and best practice to remove existing barriers to participation.	2023	Strong sector leadership
Sport England will continue to deliver design guidance that promotes diversity and inclusion in line with its wider focus on championing inclusion and addressing inequalities.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership
UK Active will continue to develop campaigns and work programmes focusing on inclusion and tackling inequalities, such as their This Girl Can and Everyone Can programmes and taskforce.	Ongoing	Strong sector leadership

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## Digital transformation

Digital technologies are transforming all sectors of the economy, bringing forward new ways of working, new services and new insight. The public leisure sector of the future must be fully digitally enabled.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
UK Active’s Digital Futures work will provide a range of reports and white papers to support the digital transformation of the sector including an assessment of digital maturity, consideration in relation to digital partnering and the development of a digital strategy and Digital Maturity Tool.	2022	Strong sector leadership
Sport England and CIMSPA have developed a Digital Marketing Hub, a free hub of information and resources aimed at improving digital marketing skills in the sport and physical activity sector.	2022-2023	Strong sector leadership Place-based

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## Strengthen the connection to health

Demonstrating the impact and alignment will be critical to building relationships between health and leisure sectors and will enable greater integration.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
The District Council Network will continue to share best practice on targeting leisure services to tackle health inequalities. Alongside this we will be sharing members' expertise and success in retrofitting and modernising centres, and pressing for the resources needed for others to follow suit.	Ongoing	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care
The LGA will publish a Social Prescribing Handbook to share good-practice examples of local authorities working in partnership with the health sector to develop strong, locally led social-prescribing opportunities.	2022	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care
Community Leisure UK will publish a report outlining the contribution of members to the wider public health agenda and alignment with key national strategic aims around health including social prescribing, skills development and a person-centred approach to health and wellbeing.	2022	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care  Place-based
Active Partnerships is developing relationships with Integrated Care Systems both at a 'systems layer' (sub-regional) and at 'place level' (districts) so it can support leisure providers in navigating the different systems and help build meaningful relationships with people involved.	2022-2025	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care  Place-based

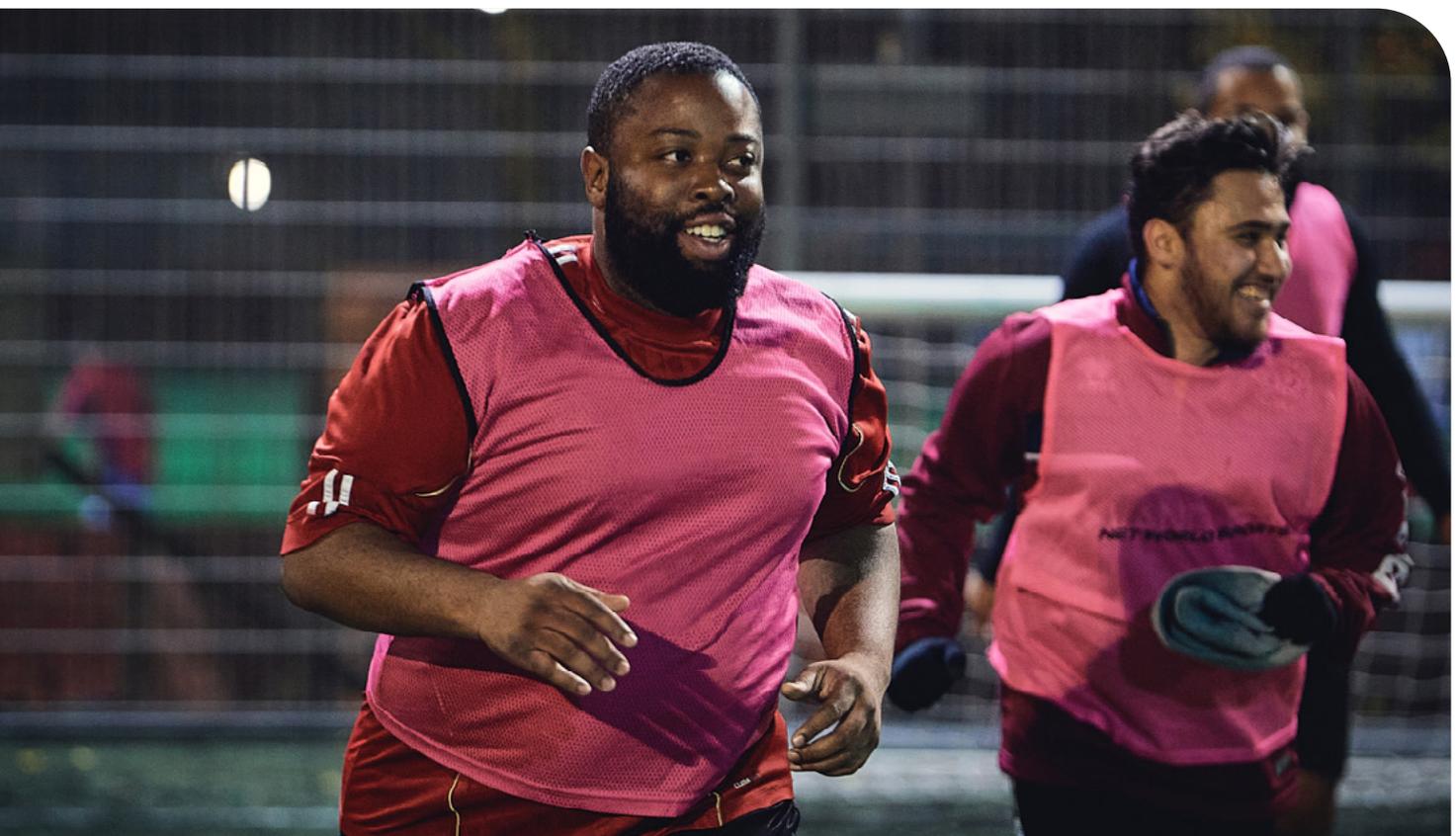


## Strengthen the connection to health

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
<p>The District Council Network will commission future research on how local services, including leisure, are paramount in shaping public health. This will evidence the effect of wider services, such as housing, VCS and economic regeneration, on changing the health of communities.</p>	2022–2025	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care
<p>UK Active will continue to develop its work relating to health and wellbeing. Specific examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concluding a research project to investigate how to transform leisure facilities into musculoskeletal hubs;</li> <li>• rolling out a Business Health Matters programme to support local businesses in improving the physical and mental health of their employees; and</li> <li>• implementing the recommendations from the Leading the Change report relating to social prescribing within fitness and leisure centres.</li> </ul>	Ongoing	Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care

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## Environmental sustainability

Supporting the sector to transition to one that has significantly reduced carbon emissions.

Commitment	Timescales	Alignment
Community Leisure UK has set up an environmental steering group to identify key areas for support in reducing carbon emissions and improving the environmental impact of facilities.	2022-2025	Low carbon Strong sector leadership
Sport England will provide investment and resource for research-based planning guidance and advice that can help reduce carbon emissions and energy consumption.	2023	Low carbon
Swim England will publish reports highlighting the benefits of investing in facilities and sustainability issues, including leading research into the newest technologies that reduce the sport's carbon footprint and make swimming more sustainable both economically and environmentally.	Ongoing	Low carbon
Swim England will provide technical and strategic support to the public sector throughout the process of delivering aquatic venues, from strategic planning to technical design, commissioning and certification. This will include providing water wellbeing accreditation, so pools are optimally set up to support the health and wellbeing agenda.	Ongoing	Low carbon Alignment of leisure, physical health, mental health and social care
APSE will continue its representation on the Sports, Environment and Climate Coalition. APSE Energy will continue to help local authorities transition their leisure services and facilities to a more carbon-friendly approach alongside APSE Training, which includes a three-year programme of carbon literacy training for senior employees.	Ongoing	Low carbon

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In isolation, no single commitment will deliver the scale of change required; however, as a collective, they provide a suite of activity that – alongside targeted and strategic investment – can build significant momentum on the road towards creating a new model for the public leisure facility sector.

This is a sector which is seeking to embrace change and create a more effective and resilient public sector provision. The extent of stakeholder support is significant and will be critical in meeting the challenges ahead.

Investment in infrastructure is needed to accelerate change, and this remains one of the biggest challenges for the sector. It is essential that stakeholders and government work together to assess opportunities and options to achieve investment and help realise the potential benefits of the sector. Creating an environment which stimulates and encourages investment will ensure social and health benefits can be realised across communities.



# 6. What happens next?

## Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the public leisure facility sector is at a crossroads.

This report has brought together key stakeholders to accelerate discussions that have stimulated this review into the sector's purpose and effectiveness.

It now provides a common agenda which creates the space to help the sector move forward together, working in partnership to provide cohesion and coordination of resources. Mutual accountability across partners will provide the culture required to safeguard the future of public leisure and provide it with a renewed sense of purpose.

Partners are committed to tracking the progress made to shift the sector in the short term through regular reviews and updates; this will ensure that the sector achieves its full potential and is better placed to meet the needs of communities.

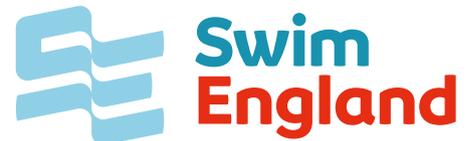
Work will continue across the sector and through the efforts of stakeholders. There will be collaboration across various elements of work, not least to meet the immediate challenges of rising costs for operators and the cost of living crisis.

Sport England will continue to support the sector and is committed to bringing sector stakeholders together to further develop the approach to evolving public sector provision, identify the actions needed to achieve progress and understand the impact of current challenges.



# Partners

This report is produced in collaboration with the following partner companies and organisations.





[sportengland.org](https://www.sportengland.org)

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