

Local Authority and Library Services – Local Government and Housing Committee Inquiry

Sport Wales Response

About Sport Wales

Sport Wales is the national organisation responsible for developing and promoting sport and physical activity in Wales. We support the delivery of strategic priorities through the Vision for Sport in Wales and the Sport Wales Strategy. We distribute Welsh Government Funding and National Lottery grants; investing in elite and grassroots sport to enable sport in Wales to thrive. We want Wales to be a more active, healthier nation, with opportunities for everyone to be active.

Sport Wales is pleased to be able to respond to the Local Government and Housing Committee's Inquiry into Local Authority and Leisure Services.

The current state of local authority leisure and library service provision;

We know that local authorities' leisure provision has had a very difficult number of years, with factors from the covid crisis onwards affecting services through: difficulty in recruitment, furlough, rising energy costs, falling membership fees and fewer people feeling confident to access services.

Whilst support through the pandemic ensured that the leisure sector in Wales was comparably resilient, this has not futureproofed facility providers against the cost-of-living crisis in terms of reduced income, or the increased expenditure associated with inflation and rising energy costs. A significant proportion of leisure facilities in Wales, particularly those with swimming pool facilities, will be under pressure with changes to timetables at the very least being an inevitable consequence.

Importantly, much of the building stock is past its replacement date, and older equipment is at risk of falling into disrepair, incurring yet more costs if any closures for a period are needed. As seen in the pandemic, facilities often require a great deal of technical and health and safety assessments to reopen too.

UK Active found that public leisure generates £3.3 billion in social value in improved health, life satisfaction, and educational attainment each year, and works with some of the most vulnerable groups in our society.¹ It was also reported by Liverpool John Moores University in 2020² that a large percentage of rehabilitation services for non-communicable diseases take place in public leisure spaces. With the Welsh Government's ambition to build on social prescribing, the importance of local authority leisure stock may be increasingly important.

Not only are providers important in their communities for health and wellbeing programmes which take place on their premises, but they are also important employers in the local economy. Community Leisure UK reports that there are around 3,000 members of staff in

¹ UK Active, The Decade of Change for Public Leisure, July 2021, available at <https://www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Decade-of-Change-for-PSL.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2023)

² Liverpool John Moores University, Why the fitness and leisure sector should be awarded 'essential service' status – by Professor Greg Whyte OBE, November 2020, available at <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/about-us/news/articles/2020/11/17/unnamed-item> (accessed 8 March 2023)

local authority leisure across Wales and that a significant number of 18–30-year-olds make up the workforce.³

The financial and operational challenges facing local authorities to maintain these vital community services;

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Leisure trusts received significant support through the Hardship Fund for local government and were able to access sector-specific funding provided by Sport Wales and through the Culture Recovery Fund; a one-time round of funding.

It was expected that 2022 would be an important year for recovery for trusts and to see more people back in leisure provision, however as global pressures increased on food and living costs, physical activity and leisure activities were some of the things people felt were possible to cut from their budgets, further exacerbating the pressures on local authority leisure trusts.

There has also been a rise in energy costs. Sport Wales has responded to this challenge by opening up its capital funding streams to local authorities and leisure trusts for green energy investments, such as solar panels, which will have a positive impact on the sustainability agenda whilst also supporting reduced energy costs. However the scope of the challenge extends beyond the capacity of the capital funding available to Sport Wales.

Our Wales Activity Tracker has shown a lack of confidence post-pandemic for participants to access leisure facilities. As leisure facilities opened up from the middle of 2020 onwards, many respondents indicated that they had low confidence on attending indoor activities.⁴ We started to see some improvement in confidence as the vaccine programme was rolled out⁵, however confidence still remained low. This was driven by people with existing health conditions, older people and women.

However, even now, three years after the pandemic began, almost half of Welsh adults say they do not feel confident in indoor courts, two in five do not feel confident in studios or sports halls, and over a third do not feel confident in gyms/health and fitness suites. This trend continues to be driven largely by female respondents, as well as those who are older.⁶

Furthermore the cost-of-living crisis is also having a detrimental impact on the operation of leisure facilities. Two in five respondents to our quarterly survey say the cost-of-living crisis has had a negative impact on their ability to be active, whilst a third say they've been doing less sport and physical activity due to changes in the cost-of-living.

³ Community Leisure UK, Wales Report, Cost of living report, Public Leisure in Crisis, November 2022, available at <https://communityleisureuk.org/work/latest-sector-landscape-reports/#wales-crisis> (accessed 7 March 2023)

⁴ Sport Wales, Savanta ComRes Data, Survey 2, October 2020, available at <https://www.sport.wales/comres-research/comres-survey-2-october-2020/>, accessed 1 March 2023

⁵ Sport Wales, Savanta ComRes Data, Survey 3, March 2021, available at <https://www.sport.wales/research-and-insight/comres-research/comres-survey-3-march-2021/>, accessed 1 March 2023

⁶ Sport Wales, Savanta ComRes Data, Survey 7, January 2023, available at <https://www.sport.wales/research-and-insight/comres-research/welsh-activity-tracker-survey-7-january-2023/>, accessed 6 March 2023

This change in participation will impact on the numbers of paying customers who are able to access leisure facilities in Wales. Indeed, one in four also say that changes in the cost-of-living means they have/will switch to cheaper/free activities, whilst one in five say they will/have taken part in fewer paid activities or spend less on sports clothing/equipment.⁷

Local authority arrangements and exit strategies where alternative delivery models utilised are unsuccessful;

N/a.

How the provision of other services provided by local authorities interact with leisure and library services;

Sport Wales is implementing a flagship programme relating to its work with and investment of local authority sport delivery. The Regional Sport Partnership (RSP) model is a key element of encouraging greater collaboration of resources, expertise and opportunities among public bodies and partners in a local area.

Sport Wales is facilitating, through RSPs, partnerships that extend beyond traditional sport providers. This means bringing different local authority services together with sport and leisure, but also different partners including universities, housing associations, third sector charities, National Governing Bodies of Sport and others who can enhance and accelerate change in the sporting offer.

This change has been brought about by aligning with Welsh Government regional working policies and a desire to support opportunities which can address the stubborn inequalities in participation among different sections of the community. It is also a recognition that local authorities have myriad requirements delivering vital services to their populations, and with smart working across public bodies, charities, and enterprises delivering leisure, sport and physical activity offerings across an area should become more sustainable.

How local authorities use alternative models of service delivery in Wales, and the perceived benefits associated with them;

Many local authorities in Wales work with different bodies in their area already to deliver sport and sports development. Below are some examples of these.

Sports development provision in Cardiff is coordinated through **Sport Cardiff**, which is hosted by Cardiff MET.⁸ Sport Cardiff has programmes around community sport through which they aim to tackle inequalities and have produced an aquatics strategy with key intents for safety and learning. Their Move More Project supports less active communities through social prescribing; and junior sport to encourage healthy habits with young people.

Newport Live delivers Sport and art development as well as a range of leisure facilities and work with schools, families and other community groups on behalf of Newport County Council. They are governed by a board of trustees as a registered charitable trust and are operated on behalf of Newport City Council.

Strength Academy Wales are a social enterprise based in Haverfordwest, not for profit and for community benefit. Community work is overseen by a Board of six directors. The

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <https://www.sportcardiff.co.uk/home#>, accessed 8 March 2023

company is voluntarily managed with some part-time employed positions. They work in partnership with Pembrokeshire Leisure, supporting not only local people through various sporting pathways, but also the community, and groups from women-only activities to ageing well and learning disability sessions too. They also partner with Haverford West community school to use facilities for the community.

Leisure Trusts. Similar to Newport Live, a number of local authorities in Wales operate their leisure facilities through Leisure Trusts. Either established “in house” or commissioned out to larger UK-based Trusts such as Freedom Leisure or GLL (Greenwich Leisure Limited). There are a number of models across Wales, which include all local authority facilities or just a number of specific sites.

Good practice to ensure sustainability of local leisure and library services for future generations.

There are many different models that could work for local communities. Examples from above have identified larger UK-based trusts through to smaller community-based charities. Along with FE and HE investing in facility and community provision, example such as Cardiff MET, Swansea, Aberystwyth and Bangor Universities, all of which could provide opportunities for the wider local community as well as servicing student populations.

Actif North Wales is the first Regional Sport Partnership to launch and has a central team to manage the governance and delivery of their strategy and delivery across the region. This consists of a regional director, partnership manager and business support officer. The actual partnership consists of the six local authorities (Conwy, Ynys Môn, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Gwynedd and Wrexham) and their respective activity deliverers, as well as Public Health Wales and Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board, Glyndwr and Bangor universities, Disability Sport Wales, GwE regional school improvement service and the six housing associations.

Through this partnership they aim to deliver on their 10-year vision which is ‘everyone in North Wales being more active, leading healthier and happier lives’, as well as their 10-year mission ‘everyone in North Wales has access to safe spaces and places; diverse opportunities to be active every day’.

Many of these models are reaching out beyond traditional leisure provision and into education, their communities, and focusing on individual groups who are less active, and have less opportunity to be active.

Sport Wales is working with the other areas which will become Sport Partnerships to explore the type of working model which will be appropriate for them. The West Wales Regional Partnership is currently working towards setting up a company limited by guarantee.

The other three, Central South, Gwent, and Mid Wales are in development, and it is anticipated that they will be operational in order to receive Sport Wales funding by April 2024.

Empowered to bring about system change, they will be the catalyst to tackling two long-standing issues:

1. Ensuring there is the right support and opportunities in place for those who are not regularly physically active - with a clear focus on removing barriers for those who need most help ;

2. Taking steps to meet the high latent demand from those who are active but want to do much more.

Whichever working model is chosen, the benefits of local authorities, public bodies, charities, entities in health, housing and education working together to tackle inequalities and low participation rates in the area in which they are based is a new and exciting opportunity to improve the sustainability of physical activity and sporting offers.

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