



Briefing: The impact of the lockdown on the UK sports and physical activity sector as it prepares for recovery

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Summary

The impacts of Covid-19 have created significant disruption in the UK sports, leisure and physical activity sector, both in terms of the physical activity behaviours of individuals and households, as well as structurally to the business and operating models of providers and organisations.

[ukactive and Community Leisure UK](#) have warned that nearly half of all public leisure facilities in the UK face permanent closure by the end of the year. They have estimated that leisure facilities face a shortfall of more than £800 million this financial year.

This briefing looks at the impacts of the lockdown on participation and on the sports and physical activity sector more widely. It also considers the strategic challenges facing the sector as it prepares for recovery.

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The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) – made up of senior leaders from the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), Community Leisure UK, Sport England, the Local Government Association (LGA), APSE and Active Partnerships – has emphasised the importance of a collaborative, whole-system approach to sport and physical activity.

Since this briefing was written, the UK government announced new financial support for local government, including for lost income. Details are not yet available but we will be assessing the package as a whole in future briefings and what impact it could have on the sports and leisure sector.

Briefing in full

Introduction

Current guidance (as of 4 July 2020)

Since lockdown measures began on 23 March 2020 sports facilities and clubs have been closed and both amateur and professional events have been suspended or cancelled. Government guidance issued on 13 May 2020 permitted outdoor sports courts, including tennis and basketball courts as well as golf courses, to reopen if those responsible for them were ready to do so and could do so safely, following Covid-19 secure guidelines. From 4 July 2020, outdoor gyms and playgrounds were permitted to reopen, as well as clubhouse bars and restaurants. The guidance on 4 July stated that indoor facilities should be kept closed, apart from toilets and throughways. Outdoor and indoor swimming pools have also had to remain closed to the public.

Each venue, including council-owned sports facilities, will make their own decisions about when their facilities are ready to open and can be operated safely. At the time of writing, the Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport's latest guidance for the public on the phased return of outdoor sport and recreation in England was last updated on 30 June 2020, and can be viewed [here](#).

The Government has consulted sports and leisure organisations around the country, but many expressed their disappointment that leisure facilities were not able to open on 4 July 2020 alongside bars, restaurants, cinemas and museums; a milestone they had been preparing for.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport, Oliver Dowden MP, said on Twitter that the government is aiming for gym and leisure facilities to be

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reopened by mid-July. He tweeted on 23 June 2020: “Many people keen to hit the gym & keeping Britain fit is key in Covid battle. We’ve made lots of progress & I know steps businesses have taken to make their spaces & equipment safe. Subject to public health, our aspiration is to reopen gyms & leisure facilities in mid-July.”

Participation – summary

Despite the lockdown, [data from Sport England](#) shows that participation levels in sport and physical activity have held up overall, with a significant proportion of the population taking part in walking, online fitness, offline fitness or informal activity in the home. There has been a surge in appreciation of exercise and physical activity and its health and wellbeing benefits. But pre-existing inequalities have been amplified; older people, those on lower incomes, adults who identify as Black, disabled people, and those living in urban areas have found it harder to be active during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Impact on the sector – summary

London Sport’s [#WeAreNotSpectators storytelling project](#) has highlighted the creative and innovative ways sports organisations have responded to the pandemic to keep people active and promote physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing in local communities. The project highlights the work of Black Prince Trust, Carers 4 Carers, GoodGym, Mini Mermaid Running Club and Our Parks among others. GoodGym, for example, have harnessed their network of volunteers to carry out good deeds in the community, with a focus on smaller tasks that can be done whilst maintaining social distancing: helping at food banks or collecting shopping or prescriptions for people who are self-isolating.

But there are significant concerns across the sector about the risks to sports facilities and jobs. UK Active, representing 4,000 members and partners from across the public, private and third sectors [has warned](#) that nearly half of all public leisure facilities in the UK (c. 1,300) face permanent closure by the end of the year, without any form of ring-fenced funding, along with the loss of more than 58,000 jobs. UK Active with Community Leisure UK have estimated that public leisure facilities face a shortfall of more than £800 million this financial year.

The District Council’s Network (DCN), representing 187 district councils in England, [has forecasted a financial hit to leisure centres of around £305 million this year](#), which it warns will put many out of business. It found that leisure services in district council areas lost over £45 million in income in April 2020 alone. Of key concern to councils is the unknown length of the lockdown constraints, the need for

social distancing, and the implications of reduced customer confidence and footfall.

Community Leisure UK, representing 110 trusts and charities which operate over 3,800 leisure facilities across the UK, often in partnership with local authorities, **found that 40 per cent of its members will be non-viable or insecure over the next one to six months**. Its members have been incurring, on average, £473,000 in monthly costs during the lockdown, including pension contributions, utilities and standing charges, costs of non-furloughed staff, maintenance and facility checks, and keeping some services running,

Local authority written submissions to the DCMS Select Committee's **inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors**, also highlight the scale of the challenge facing local leisure services. For example, **Shropshire Council** have planned for an estimated loss of income of over £2m for the year for Culture, Leisure and Tourism services in the Shropshire Unitary area.

The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) – made up of senior leaders from the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), Community Leisure UK, Sport England, the Local Government Association (LGA), APSE and Active Partnerships – **have emphasised the importance of a collaborative, whole-system approach** to sport and physical activity.

Participation in sport and physical activity during lockdown

During the lockdown, government advice was clear that daily exercise could, and should, continue. While individuals were not allowed to gather in groups until 1 June 2020, the activities and campaigns of sports bodies and groups, including #StayInWorkOut, #WeAreInDefeatable and This Girl Can, as well as the activities of fitness professionals, celebrities and the wider sector, all encouraged people to remain active, within the guidelines. Government announcements encouraged people to take part in physical activity alone, both outside and within the home, including walking, running, cycling, fitness and dance, among others. As of 4 July 2020, up to two households have been permitted to gather in groups of more than six people indoors or outdoors, provided members of different households follow social distancing guidelines. And single adult households are now able to form a support bubble with one other household.

Sport England has been monitoring how the lockdown and subsequent social distancing guidelines have impacted exercise and physical activity. The annual Active Lives survey showed that **physical activity levels were at a record high before the coronavirus pandemic**, with 28.6 million adults active (doing at least

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150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week), up 404,600 people on the previous year.

During the lockdown, physical activity levels have held up, although inevitably there was an almost total suspension of face-to-face group sport participation. However, 53 per cent of adults in England surveyed said that they had been encouraged to exercise as a result of the once-a-day exercise allowance. Physical exercise and keeping active is still a priority for many people. 69 per cent of those surveyed said exercise was helping them to manage their physical health, while 65 per cent said exercise was helping with their mental health during the outbreak. 62 per cent stated that exercise is more important now than ever.

The types of physical activity participation showed:

- 59 per cent of adults walked in the last week
- 44 per cent did online fitness, offline fitness or informal activity in the home
- 18 per cent went jogging
- 8 per cent cycled

Nevertheless, the extent to which people have been able to stay fit is dependent on their circumstances and Covid-19 has amplified a number of pre-existing inequalities in participation. There has been a considerable amount of public discussion on the inequality of access to outdoor or public spaces, felt particularly keenly by those living in inner cities or those who do not have access to a garden. Sport England data also shows that those in lower socio-economic groups, older people and people from some BAME groups have reported doing less exercise than those from other backgrounds. In late April, just 27 per cent of adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds were active. Between 3 April and 11 May, less than a quarter of adults that identify as Black were meeting recommended activity levels.

Impacts on the sport and leisure sector

The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the sports and leisure sector has been profound and far-reaching. Organisations across the country are in many cases facing immediate closure if they do not receive urgent financial support, which has been highlighted by organisations including UK Active, Sport England and the Local Government Association. Sport and leisure is not only a critical component of measures to improve public health but is also a revenue earner for many councils across the country through earned income, business rates, fees and charges. There is a significant interest in ensuring a vibrant visitor and leisure economy.

Stakeholders within the sector have been quick to sound the alarm. The District Council Network (DCN) has called on the government to cover the projected £350 million shortfall in leisure centre funding. Despite the relaxing of some social distancing regulations, it is still unclear when many will be able to reopen.

Cllr Dan Humphreys, DCN lead member for enhancing quality of life, said:

“After months of lockdown, and being unable to visit their local gym or swimming pool, it would be a devastating blow to communities to find they no longer have their local leisure centre, once we come out of this pandemic. But the sad reality is that our leisure centres are in a crisis right now. Their income has plummeted and some may never recover without a lifeline from government which helps stabilise leisure centres in the short term. As local leaders, district councils are committed to tackling this health and economic crisis now and in the future. Leisure and sport will be critical to improving the health of people from all ages and backgrounds as we emerge from this crisis. As destinations in themselves, they also draw people in to town centres creating community spaces and support for local businesses. We should now come together to create a leisure and sport service that plays its full role in the national health and economic recovery.”

Local authority written submissions to the DCMS Select Committee’s [inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors](#), also highlight the scale of the challenge facing local leisure services.

- Shropshire Council have planned for an estimated loss of income of over £2m for the year for Culture, Leisure and Tourism services in the Shropshire Unitary area. The council’s leisure centres have seen that swimming and fitness memberships are not being renewed, and people are cancelling existing memberships. The council is anticipating that many people will have identified new and different exercise regimes and may continue with these as the lockdown is eased.
- Malden District Council has closed its two leisure centres with a likely loss to the Council exceeding £250,000.
- Active Sussex found evidence that where local government activities have stopped, leisure departments are still helping to promote the physical and mental wellbeing message through social media and communications channels.
- The City of Brighton and Hove has seen a big impact on the volunteer

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workforce who are unable to operate clubs or provide coaching in close environments. The council has also seen a surge in walking and cycling and has responded by providing virtual exercise challenges.

- Some councils have invested funding into their leisure centres in the form of loans, with differed payment facilities to support community providers.
- In its submission, the LGA warned that: “Leisure operators are largely unsupported by [Government] measures announced to date, including the emergency response fund from Sport England. A bespoke support package, or a cast-iron guarantee from Government that it will reimburse councils explicitly for investing their own funds in providers, is needed if this sector is to survive.”
- The LGA’s evidence also reported that many leisure centres have taken on a specific Covid-19 response role. For example, the City of Wolverhampton converted its WV Active Aldersley leisure centre into a food distribution hub.

Sported’s ‘Community Pulse’ survey, found that 1 in 4 grassroots community sports groups are concerned that participants may not choose to return to their activities due to community concerns around safety and the financial uncertainty facing many families, particularly those in deprived areas. The local government sector has expressed concerns about the level of emergency funding for community sports organisations.

The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) – made up of senior leaders from the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), Community Leisure UK, Sport England, the Local Government Association (LGA), APSE and Active Partnerships – has re-emphasised the importance of a collaborative, whole-system approach to sport and physical activity. Sport England’s Local Delivery Pilots (LDPs) are examples of this in practice; they have started to highlight what it takes to embed this way of working and the benefits for local communities. LGPAP argues that this way of working is more important than ever as the sector seeks to adapt to and influence the ‘new normal’.

The LGPAP published a discussion paper, **Why an active community needs to be at the heart of renewal** published in June 2020, and said:

“We believe there is now a significant opportunity to demonstrate the impact of physical activity (including sport, recreation, active travel, physical education) and show how it can help the long-term recovery by building on the Government’s unambiguous support for the physical and mental health benefits of remaining physically active.

“[...] now more than ever we need a balance between, on one hand, creative collaborative community development, including influencing and integrated approaches, and, on the other, supporting the future of the assets as part of the wider systems approach. There also needs to be awareness of the impact on those people who already take part in sport (the “core market”) within the overall response, which will also need stimulus and support in order to ensure that participation rates do not fall away.”

There is optimism in the sector that once social distancing guidelines can be incorporated into operating procedures, which many groups and organisations have already been working towards, participation in sport and physical activity will return. However, the aforementioned Sported survey shows that many local groups have concerns about the short term future.

A county perspective: Active Sussex

The experience of Active Sussex shows the difficulties facing many of those in the community sports sector at a local level. Active Sussex is a registered charity and one of 43 Active partnerships operational across England which aims to increase participation in sport and physical activity.

In a [written submission of evidence to the DCMS Inquiry on the impact of Covid-19](#), Active Sussex reported the severe financial impact on leisure and sports facilities in their area, as well as the challenges of targeting services at people facing acute loneliness or exclusion. Digital exclusion was also a barrier here.

Active Sussex stress that without urgent financial support from the government, leisure trusts and many leisure providers will not survive and that will have a profound impact on the availability of facilities in the future. As an example of the problem, they described how certain sport and leisure facilities could only partly reopen under current guidelines and therefore would be unable to generate their usual revenue. But they would still have high running costs making reopening immediately harder.

Active Sussex emphasised that at the local level there have been success stories. There has been widespread engagement and positive behavioural change in relation to physical exercise during lockdown. The city of Brighton and Hove has seen a huge increase in walking and cycling and is considering how to adapt city planning to accommodate these cultural changes going forward. Widespread use of social media and online service provision has also been successful. Thousands

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have taken part in online events every week, particularly students and young people. This has shown the value of digital communication and engagement to institutions that did not previously have a strong online presence.

Looking ahead to recovery

There are still many unknowns as we look to the future for the sports and physical activity sector. Some organisations have been able to evolve and adapt their business models with a focus on community outcomes and developing socially distanced provision. And there has been much discussion and debate about how to harness the positive public engagement with sport and physical activity that has emerged out of the lockdown period. This is important for the wider physical health mandate of sports bodies and community sports organisations.

Many of the submissions to the DCMS Select Committee inquiry emphasised the importance of collaboration and coordination amongst organisations and stakeholders in the sector. This builds on the priorities set out by the [Local Government Physical Activity Partnership \(LGPAP\)](#) which has advocated that improvements in physical activity participation require a “collaborative, whole-system approach”.

The LGPAP has stressed the importance of building on the momentum of national campaigns such as This Girl Can and We Are Undefeatable. The partnership wants the Government to encourage future integrated campaigns and partnerships alongside steps to protect and support individual public and commercial facilities that are at risk of immediate closure. LGPAP’s aspiration is for integrated and localised plans that bring together councils (who often have direct responsibility for parks and open spaces as well as other sectors including transport, health and social care that interact with physical activity) community leaders, third sector and private facilities and club owners and operators.

Beyond addressing the immediate financial shortfalls in the sports and physical activity sector and ensuring a whole-systems approach, the LGPAP has identified seven strategic areas for coordinated action as the sector emerges out of lockdown and prepares for recovery.

- **Addressing health and economic inequalities.** “We need to turn temporary habits gained during lockdown (when normal daily routines have been different) into permanent habits. Targeted work to address gaps is going to be critical if stubborn inequalities associated with physical inactivity are to be tackled.”
- **Physical and mental health.** “There needs to be a real focus on prevention

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and approaches such as social prescribing, which are likely to be in high demand. They will require a high-quality, population-level response as well as a diverse activity offer to meet individual needs.”

- **Active travel in rebooting the economy.** “We need to take advantage of the contribution that active travel can play in meeting ongoing social distancing rules and influence transport planners to ensure this can be embedded in a long-term approach. It is encouraging to see the emphasis placed on active travel by Government, but this can and should go much further.”
- **Environmental sustainability and climate change.** “These responses remain vital. Planning services that enable an active environment will help to meet those priorities. We have seen the impact of high-density housing and lack of access to outdoor space. Pressures to kick-start housing construction have to be weighed against any planning requirements and capital receipts. Investing in our outdoor spaces should be a priority.”
- **Young and older people.** “The lack of activity among young people and older people during lockdown is going to have immediate physical and mental health impacts. Young people will not have been accessing sufficient levels of activity, while older people might have been unable or unwilling to leave their homes. This is likely to create huge pressure for direct support to help get people moving again.”
- **Building stronger communities.** “Strengths-based approaches working with local communities can yield incredibly powerful outcomes. Community sports clubs and associations can help our recovery and local walking and exercise groups can help bring people together; but how do we tap into the new volunteering that has emerged over the past few months and use it to help build a better, kinder society?”
- **Service integration:** “The financial challenges facing local authorities and local partners present an opportunity to demonstrate and escalate the integration of services, such as social care and community hubs, to enable better, more financially effective interventions.”

The LGPAP said: “We need to align the benefits of being physically active with local priorities and show how physical activity can be a really effective means of helping the recovery. We need to see ourselves and our work as part of the local ecosystem, working with communities to achieve better outcomes. We must learn from the past to reset the future.”

Comment

Covid-19 has created significant disruption in the UK sports, leisure and physical

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activity sector, both in terms of the physical activity behaviours of individuals and households, as well as structurally to the business and operating models of providers and organisations. The sector faces a significant financial shortfall. UK Active and Community Leisure UK puts the figure at more than £800 million this financial year (for public leisure centres, swimming pools and community services funded via local authorities whether in-house or through external contacts). This is in the context of a wider local authority funding shortfall, increased need in the community as a result of Covid-19, and on-going demand pressures in social care. At the same time, sports facilities and groups are on the frontline of the UK's preventative fight against inactivity and obesity; they are inspiring active lives, getting the nation moving, and helping us to become happier and healthier while contributing billions in GVA to the UK economy. Weakened sports and sports and physical activity infrastructure is a risk not just to the health and wellbeing of the nation, but also its productivity.

Ring-fenced funding for sport and physical activity will be required to help the sector move beyond the immediate challenges of meeting running costs and reopening safely. Beyond that attention will undoubtedly shift to medium and longer-term resilience with a likely focus on more co-ordinated local approaches that harness the power of sport and physical activity in a wider range of settings and service areas to transform lives and communities.

Further reading

[UK Active and Community Leisure UK](#)

[Local Government Physical Activity Partnership](#)

*All LGIU Covid-19 resources are [gathered in one place](#) and you can also sign up to our *Global-Local pandemic bulletin*.*

[Post-Covid Councils – how will Covid-19 change the world](#) (LGIU workstream)

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