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# The Decade of Change for Public Sector Leisure

## INTRODUCTION

***This paper from ukactive sets out a vision for the future of Public Sector Leisure (PSL). It is based on a comprehensive consultation with PSL members, and provides a roadmap for progress that will enable the survival, recovery and development of this essential part of the physical activity sector.***

## BACKGROUND

PSL provides local, place-based assets and employs a workforce equipped with the crucial skills and expertise to support people to lead more active and healthy lifestyles – all of which are essential to supporting the health, wellness and productivity of the nation. Despite this, these facilities and the workforce, in addition to the wealth of sport, fitness and community services delivered within them, are currently at risk of being lost without urgent support and long-term reform.

As we are all too aware, the pandemic has caused unprecedented damage across society, with the impact of COVID-19 accentuating the importance of community-based physical activity, yet exposing the fragility of its infrastructure.

This fragility has emerged primarily because the landscape in which PSL operates has shifted significantly over the last decade. During that time, significant challenges have led to the diversification of PSL delivery across the nation, creating a misunderstood and, in places, fragmented sector which lacks a unified purpose and vision. Due to severe financial pressures on Local Authorities and its non-statutory status, PSL delivery has increasingly become focussed on driving commercial income, often to the detriment of services that put customers, communities and outcomes at the heart of their approach. The current pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted the significant challenges that the sector has been contending with for some time, many of which were explored through our recent member consultation.

## UKACTIVE FUTURE OF LEISURE CONSULTATION

In October 2020, with increasing awareness of the difficulties being experienced by the sector, ukactive undertook a series of interviews with a cross-section of its membership base. The members consulted were CEOs specifically providing PSL provision, across the four nations of the UK, via multiple operating models that included in-house management, social enterprises, charitable trusts, management companies and community interest companies.

This comprehensive consultation identified key challenges regarding the infrastructure and effective delivery of PSL services, and highlights an urgent need for action to ensure the long-term sustainability of this valuable part of the physical activity eco-system. What also became apparent was our members' passion to make an even greater contribution to the communities they serve and, despite varying delivery models, a desire and willingness of this part of the eco-system to work together to evolve. This desire was evident through the many opportunities that were identified by the members consulted as to how we could and should move forward and transform.



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## Opportunities

The opportunities are addressed in more detail within our full consultation report but include;

- >> Developing a national strategy for PSL
- >> Defining PSL role in Whole systems approaches to physical activity
- >> Reviewing current contracting arrangements and approaches
- >> Building Back Better – National Infrastructure Strategy (Rationalise, Consolidate & Invest)
- >> Adopting a more coordinated approach to demonstrating Social Value
- >> Enhancing the image and profile of the sector
- >> Developing a Long-Term Workforce Plan
- >> Collaborating – Together we are Stronger

These opportunities are consistent with the varying delivery models within PSL as well as the industry as a whole, and have been identified as central themes to inform the deconstruction and reconstruction of PSL delivery. When members were asked to describe the purpose of PSL, there was no one consistent answer. However, the general consensus seems to be that ***'PSL delivers social, economic and health outcomes on both a local and national level whilst also providing affordable, accessible services and facilities to local communities.'***

## Key areas

Significant commitment and effort will be required from all leaders and stakeholders within the physical activity eco-system to achieve these macro-level aspirations. ukactive, working in partnership with stakeholders, have already begun to address micro-level themes that our part of the eco-system can influence, creating an informed foundation to support wider system decision-making in the evolution of PSL. These themes include the following and are expanded upon in the next section of this paper;

- 1 Data and Insight
- 2 Standards and Improvement
- 3 Procurement
- 4 Tackling health Inequalities

Another key area – sector workforce – will be developed in partnership with CIMSPA, and will build on their existing work in this area.



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## AREA 1: DATA AND INSIGHT

As an industry, we are acutely aware of the positive impact we can have on people's lives. However, we have historically been unable to provide clear and robust evidence of this to stakeholders outside the industry. The pandemic has highlighted the sheer scale of the knowledge gap but it has also encouraged the sector to collaborate and share information to respond to the urgent need for data and insight. This included recovery projections, health and safety data on the prevalence of COVID in our facilities and the financial burden placed on the sector as a result of lockdowns and restrictions – all crucial data used to help secure the National Leisure Recovery Fund.

The need to ensure we can, with strong, robust evidence tell the story of what this industry does for society does not and should not go away as we emerge from the pandemic. The introduction of the Moving Communities platform has enabled us to start from the brilliant basics, with a collective willingness and ability to build a crucial dataset. This finally allows the industry to align with the system, provide evidence of our credibility, and most importantly to ensure local leaders have access to information to improve, intervene, benchmark and make informed decisions on the delivery of PSL services.

Data provided by the platform in the first 7 weeks since re-opening has put to rest any doubt in the value of local leisure facilities. Initial data shows 86 per cent of respondents prefer exercising in a leisure centre rather than a more informal setting, and highlights a direct correlation between deprivation decile and the preference to exercise in a leisure centre. For many who work within the sector, insight like this will not come as a surprise but it is the start of being able to provide the much-needed evidence that has been called for to substantiate claims of what many know the sector does for society.

Moving Communities will play a crucial role in informing and ensuring the long-term future of PSL, and it is therefore vital that we maintain an ongoing commitment to the platform, the willingness to show a shared position of vulnerability, as well as a preparedness to open ourselves up to scrutiny.

## AREA 2: STANDARDS AND IMPROVEMENT

Building back better includes the sector being able to set the highest possible standards it can, whilst working collaboratively to assess how, as a sector, we can continually improve. This opportunity will require a willingness to evolve and adapt in a number of areas, and this will include driving the professionalism and quality of services we provide – after all, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Consistent, unified standards across the sector will provide a clear foundation for quality provision, and will help to build on the newfound confidence the sector has earned under close scrutiny from the Government, its agencies, sector partners and, most crucially, the customer.

By continuing to demonstrate consistent standards for safety, inclusion and other key areas, the sector will enhance consumer confidence increasing the uptake of its services, and progress confidently into a development phase for growth.

Sport England and ukactive are working collaboratively to develop a set of standards and a new frame-



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work for improvement that all parts of the sector can adopt. This will allow individual facilities and organisations – both publicly and privately operated – to demonstrate their compliance to standards and performance management but also contribute to the continuous improvement of service delivery across the sector.

The Active Standard was announced by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson at the ukactive Summit in October 2020, when she set out our vision, for a new sector standard which offers the all-encompassing, flexible approach needed to consistently maintain the standards necessary to support the continued professionalism of the sector.

This framework will foster assured partnership working with Local Authorities, supporting the evolution of a place-based approach, focused on outcomes and integrated care with the confidence of a foundational standard and a platform to create an industry of continual improvement.

A unified, consistent and committed approach to enhancing and maintaining standards is vital to progress. Supported by a framework for improvement and a professional workforce, it will enhance the sectors' ability to reach new audiences, accelerate its charge in tackling inequalities, while growing its reputation and broadening opportunities for new partnerships across the wider public health agenda.

## AREA 3: PROCUREMENT

Public leisure generates £3.3 billion in social value on account of improved health, life satisfaction, and educational attainment every year, and engages some of our nation's most vulnerable groups. This makes leisure fundamental to achieving local councils' aspirations for the wellbeing of their communities, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

The ability of public leisure providers to support the health and wellbeing of the nation has however been hampered by procurement processes driven by procedure, rather than needs, and a tendency to conflate the procurement of public services with the procurement of goods, treating both as one and the same. The procurement of services must be driven by need, not procedure, in order to deliver tangible benefits to the end user. Our recent response to the consultation on the Governments Green paper for Transforming Public Procurement was the start of the process to drive the agenda to address this and some of the other procurement challenges, addressed within our consultation report, that impact the delivery of PSL. Whilst we lobby for reform in this area there are steps that can be taken by the wider physical activity eco-system to address the challenges relating to procurement and the 'race to the bottom' culture that has been created in the procurement of leisure services.

Whilst it is possible for PSL services to be sustainable, positive financial contributors to local authorities with the potential to address local inequalities, the balance over recent years has tipped far too much in favour of prioritising cost effectiveness over social value. Given the impact of the pandemic on local government finances, there is a real danger that the scale could tip even further in favour of commercially-driven procurement, thereby eclipsing targeted community services.

Many parts of the system contribute to this focus on income generation through leisure assets including



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but not limited to local authorities, who are suffering from decade-long budget cuts and now COVID-19 financial pressures, consultants who are recruited to save millions from contracts and leisure delivery providers who have continued to compete for unsustainable contracts, driving down costs often to the detriment of social outcomes. However, with a collective effort and if every part of the system can begin to ensure that they are placing social value at the heart of what they do we may just start to see a shift away from this race to the bottom culture and transactional contracting approach to procurement of leisure services.

Sport England's soon to be published Leisure Services Delivery guidance (LSDG), an evolution of the original Leisure Procurement Toolkit, will be a crucial document in supporting the achievement of this. Accompanied by the Strategic Outcomes Planning Guidance, it will shape effective and efficient leisure service delivery functions which make a major contribution towards local strategic outcomes.

It is within our collective means to address many of the existing challenges related to procurement by creating stronger and partnership-driven client-to-provider relationships. This will allow for effective collaboration and importantly the ability to develop services and products that are not only financially sustainable, but also adequately tackle local inequalities and support the health and wellbeing of the wider community.

## AREA 4: TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Many working within the industry witness, day in day out, the fantastic and tireless work that is undertaken to deliver services that have substantial benefits to the wellness of the nation, driving local health outcomes and addressing inequalities. A [report published in 2020](#) by Liverpool John Moores University showed 66 per cent of all pre-hab and re-hab services for cancer take place within leisure facilities.

Despite these successes and PSL already playing such a pivotal role in supporting health and wellbeing, there remains huge untapped potential and a strong desire across the sector to play an even greater role in contributing to our collective wellness.

With this desire to do more, there is recognition that we must continue learning and improving so that we can adapt, enhance and develop services that truly seek to tackle inequalities and improve access to PSL. It is no longer just about offering concession rates to engage under-represented groups but taking a whole systems approach to support particular groups ensuring the services offered meet their social, physical and emotional needs. ukactives recent ['Life in Our Years': Unlocking Physical Activity Participation for Older Adults](#) report not only demonstrates the extensive work within the sector in providing for older adults but also shows that our sector has the opportunity to do more, fine-tuning the ways in which the industry targets, delivers, monitors and evaluates its programmes for older adults.

This unwavering commitment to supporting the health of the nation was further demonstrated in November 2020 when ukactive, in partnership with the industry, pledged 500,000 hours of free activity to the social prescribing pathway. This will enable the fitness and leisure industry to demonstrate the major role it can play in social prescribing ambitions supporting new pathways to improve patient's choice and control over how they become more active. Work is currently underway to highlight evidence-based pro-



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grammes, good practices, models and approaches already existing within the sector around health care pathways and social prescribing that will support more effective linking and integration of the sector to commissioners of healthcare.

We will continue to work with partners and pro-actively engage with health and social care at the highest levels to create a clearly defined role for PSL and to embed and integrate the sector with national and local health systems.

## A DECADE OF CHANGE

Whilst this past year has brought significant challenges, many of which we are still facing, it has provided everyone within the physical activity eco-system with a moment to reflect. A rare opportunity to pause and look back on where the sector has come from and to learn from the failures and the challenges that are inhibiting progression and the ability to truly transform.

This scrutiny has led us to identify significant changes which must be made in order to not only sustain PSL provision but also to evolve and set out our future role and purpose. With this in mind, it is essential that we do not revert back to pre-COVID tendencies, and instead use COVID as a catalyst to embark on a decade of change for PSL, and create a more sustainable, resilient sector.

While we begin to focus our attention on long-term transformation for PSL, we must not ignore the gaping financial hole that has been left by the pandemic. The current National Leisure Recovery Fund (NLRF) constitutes only a slight alleviation of the financial burden currently facing PSL, especially considering its modelling was contingent on reopening in the first quarter of 2021, as opposed to the second quarter. Many facilities will not see a return to pre-COVID-19 levels of income for at least 18 months, that coupled with increased operational costs as a result of COVID-19 will mean public leisure facilities risk becoming financially unviable without an urgent lifeline to help them survive and recover.

Further financial aid is also essential to ensure a level of continuity in the services being delivered, secure the retention of a skilled workforce, to ultimately provide a strong, stable foundation for the future transformation of PSL, because building back better is very different than building back from nothing, with nothing.

This continued call for further financial aid to support PSL must be done in parallel to embarking on the process of long-term transformation. Furthermore, this transformation must also take into account the growing and leading role of private sector provision with communities across the country. Every level of Government must fully understand, acknowledge, and support the role private operators play in improving the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of their communities. There is an opportunity for PSL and Private operators to complement one another enabling both parts of the sector to develop and grow its own unique proposition to communities.



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## PROPOSED ROADMAP FOR TRANSFORMATION

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the whole of the physical activity eco-system to play a positive role in evolving and re-positioning services putting aside differences in opinion and coalescing around this common purpose. Taking action now and demonstrating this unified leadership amongst the key stakeholders involved in PSL will provide the pro-active, strong and ambitious response needed to drive an agenda for transformation.

We have created the below roadmap to demonstrate how, collectively we can embark on the journey of transformation of PSL. The roadmap is informed by key milestones identified by ukactive and other stakeholders and demonstrates how leaders within the eco-system are already working together to address the challenges for PSL. It also crucially demonstrates how system leaders are utilising a combination of guidance, advocacy, insight and leadership in order to inform and shape the future of PSL.

We have coined the term decade of change because to be truly transformational in our approach will take time and a monumental and committed effort from all within the physical activity eco-system. Collectively, we can re-define PSL ensuring services are more resilient and in a much better position to increase physical activity levels, reduce obesity, support mental health and wellbeing and most importantly tackle inequalities.

 <b>Future of Public Sector Leisure (PSL) – The Proposed Approach</b>				
	<i>Phase One: Consult &amp; Engage</i>	<i>Phase Two: State of The Nation Workshops &amp; Report</i>	<i>Phase Three: Establish PSL Stakeholder Group</i>	<i>Phase Four: Publication of Blueprint for Public Sector Leisure</i>
<b>Objective</b>	<i>Whole systems approach to transforming public sector leisure</i>	<i>Build on consultations, data and insight to inform a thorough independent sector review</i>	<i>A coordinated group of Key stakeholders working together with the sole purpose of evolving PSL</i>	<i>A strategic plan that supports the delivery of public sector leisure services that meet their specific vision and purpose</i>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ukactive members consultation inquiry paper</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; CLUK MOU</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; LGA Joint Position Statement</li> <li>- APSE/LGA/CLOA consultation report findings released</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workshops to define themes &amp; future direction for PSL</li> <li>- Publication of State of The Nation Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify deliverables, capabilities and tasks</li> <li>- Identify people, process and physical course of action</li> <li>- National Partner collaboration to inform Comprehensive Spending Review submission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collective agreement on the strategic direction and priorities for evolving PSL</li> <li>- Identified short – med – long term plan for implementation by all key stakeholders</li> </ul>
	<b>Oct 20 - July 21</b>	<b>Aug – Oct 21</b>	<b>Oct 21 – March 22</b>	<b>March 22</b>
<b>Sector Specific Work in 2021 to support long term evolution of PSL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lobby and call for financial aid</li> <li>- ukactive respond to Procurement green paper</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; EGYM publish 'Life in our Years' Active Ageing report</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; MATRIX undertake sector wide review of healthcare pathways</li> <li>- Sport England Leisure Services Delivery Guidance (LSDG) published</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ukactive's 'The Active Standard' is launched and piloted</li> <li>- Moving Communities Platform to include social value</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; Sport England inclusion consultation outcome and next steps</li> <li>- 'Everyone Can' call for good practice (disability inclusion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ukactive &amp; Sport England This Girl Can Playbook publication for sector</li> <li>- ukactive &amp; Sport England Digital Futures Report</li> <li>- Social Prescribing Pilots in partnership with Sport England and NHS England</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implementation of long term plan</li> </ul>