

Lisa Nandy MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
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22nd July 2025

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you to you and your team at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for your hard work to secure £400 million in the Spending Review to support upgraded grassroots sports facilities that promote health, wellbeing and community cohesion. It is a remarkable achievement and a positive step towards supporting our national public sport and leisure infrastructure to become more sustainable and to deliver the Government's Plan for Change.

We appreciate the work your officials have done with us to understand our concerns about the leisure sector's viability and to gather evidence to find a way forward to support these vital services. As discussed with your team, our national public leisure infrastructure plays an integral role in supporting the wider sport, health and physical activity ecosystem and addressing national priorities. Without it, [75 per cent](#) of grassroots sports clubs and [66 per cent](#) of NHS cancer rehabilitation services could not operate. Moving Communities data in 2023/24 showed the total net health savings generated by 563 public leisure facilities alone was [£146.3 million](#). We look forward to continue working with your officials on the forthcoming physical activity strategy to maximise the benefits of utilising leisure facilities to deliver your agenda and the [NHS 10 year Health plan](#).

The new funding represents an opportunity to take an evidence-based approach to investing in the assets that communities want, and to build on the integrated approaches that are already happening locally. However, we are concerned that this will be a missed opportunity.

The English devolution white paper articulates your strong commitment to place based investment, and we would like to work with you to ensure this funding delivers your vision.

Previous Governments have favoured thematic investment via the National Governing Bodies for sport. But evidence from the [Active Lives Survey show](#) that gyms, swimming pools and leisure centres are driving activity levels, while participation in team sports has decreased over the past 10 years.

We know that you understand the importance of this shift in approach to funding. Our report on leisure service transformation shows that [innovative approaches to integration](#) between leisure, health and care providers, voluntary groups and communities is already happening in pockets across the country. These new integrated approaches are tackling inequalities and physical inactivity and are directly supporting the Government's missions, but they need investment and support to thrive everywhere.

Local government is the biggest funder of public sport and leisure services and are the leaders who know their communities and places best. Investing the £400 million directly through Councils and Combined Authorities will enable them to work with the diverse range

of health, care and physical activity providers to get more people active in the ways they want to access in their places and deliver on wider local and national priorities.

This new place-based investment approach will deliver far greater financial and social benefits than a top-down thematic approach, better support integration with preventative health activities and will also follow the evidence. Empowering councils as place leaders to invest in the assets that deliver for communities will support the Government's vision for [neighbourhood health services](#) and its new approach to outcome-based [accountability](#) for councils. We enclose some key findings at the end of this letter which shows that more nuanced place-led investments are likely to reach more people, encourage sustainable behaviours and deliver on multiple policy priorities.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the opportunities with you in more detail to ensure this funding has the maximum impact for our communities and that the investment in local facilities reaps dividends for the health system.

Yours sincerely,



Donna Pentelow, **Chair, Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association**



Kirsty Cumming, **CEO, Community Leisure UK**



Cllr Liz Green, **Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, Local Government Association**



Robin Tuddenham, **President, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers**



Andy Salmon, **Chief Executive, Swim England**



Huw Edwards, **CEO, ukactive**

Please send your response to d'jaleh.mccrystal@local.gov.uk.

Appendix: Key findings

New trends

- Between 2023 and 2024 membership of private and public gyms grew by [6.1 per cent](#), rising from 9.9 million members to 11.5 million members.
- Usage of leisure facilities from people living in the 10 per cent most [deprived areas](#) in England is growing at a faster rate than other IMD areas.
- [customer survey data](#) shows 86 per cent of respondents prefer to exercise in a leisure facility over informal settings and 63 per cent said they were less active if they couldn't go to the leisure facility.
- The number of children and young people taking part in gym and fitness activities has increased by [12 per cent](#) over the past six years.
- Active Lives survey data for 2023/24 shows the number of adults participating in [team sports](#) has fallen by 0.5 per cent since 2015-16 and the number of [children and young](#) people participating in team sports has remained static over the past six years.
- Participation in [fitness activities](#) continues to grow, with 904,000 more adults taking part in fitness activities compared to 12 months ago. In 2023/24, 3.4 million adults took part in team sport at least twice in 28 days, by comparison 14.2 million adults took part in fitness activities at least twice in the same period.
- [27 per cent](#) of the adult population go swimming each year, making it one of the most popular activities in England. The popularity of swimming is growing amongst older age groups, with 280,600 additional regular swimmers aged 55+ in the last [two years](#). More adults with a disability or long term health condition swim than play football, tennis, rugby, hockey and cricket [combined](#). Almost 20 per cent of adults with three or more health impairments swim.
- If current physical inactivity trends continue, [the population will be 35 per cent less active by 2030](#). This will put considerable pressure on the NHS and the public purse.
- Worryingly, according to Sport England's latest Active Lives Children and Young People survey for the 2023-24 academic year, 30 per cent of children in Year 7 are unable to swim 25m competently, confidently and proficiently, a statistic that has risen from 27 per cent in 2017-18.
- We know that people value their swimming pools, with three quarters of children saying they want to swim more and 91 per cent of children stating they either "love" or "like" swimming.

Public sport and leisure facilities contribute to the following policy priorities:

- The NHS' performance relies on public leisure facilities to deliver its services - [two thirds](#) of cancer rehabilitation services and [79 per cent](#) of social prescribing initiatives are delivered in leisure centres. In addition, 75 per cent of grassroots sports clubs rely on affordable leisure facilities to operate.
- Being physically active prevents millions of cases of health conditions and diseases, saving the healthcare system [£10.5 billion](#) a year.
- [£20 billion](#) in value is created each year, through stronger and safer communities including: 10,000 fewer crime incidents, improved levels of social trust, sense of belonging and community engagement.

- Sport and physical activity created [£107.2](#) billion in social value in 2022/23
- Swimming prevents [80,000](#) cases of ill health each year, saving the NHS and social care system hundreds of millions of pounds annually. [72 per cent](#) of schools use public swimming pools to deliver their statutory responsibility for learning to swim and the water safety curriculum teaching children vital life saving skills and supporting the delivery of drowning prevention.
- In 2020 the sport and leisure sector provided [586,000](#) jobs in the UK.
- Sport and physical activity contributes [£39 billion](#) to the UK's economy (e.g. sale of equipment and clothing, gym membership and match fees), a significant portion of this comes from grassroots sports which relies on public leisure facilities to operate in.

Financial challenges affecting public sport and leisure services

- Councils provide formal and informal opportunities for communities to be active. Local government is responsible for 2,727 public leisure facilities, a third of grass pitches; 13 per cent of sports halls; around a fifth of all health and fitness facilities and the majority of the UK's 27,000 parks and green spaces.
- Local government is the biggest public funder spending £1.4 billion a year on sport, leisure, green spaces, parks and playgrounds. However, councils remain under severe [financial pressure](#), LGA analysis before the Spending Review showed a £8.4 billion spending gap predicted by 2028/29.
- [500](#) swimming pools have been lost since 2010, totalling a massive 34,859 sq metres of water space. Almost half of these (42 per cent) have been lost in the last 5 years.
- Additionally, of the 10 local authorities who have seen the biggest decline in pool space, [70 per cent](#) have higher than average indices of multiple deprivation, risking exacerbating already stark health inequalities.
- The increase in National Insurance Contributions has added 4 per cent to leisure staffing budgets in 2025-26.
- The current public sport and leisure infrastructure is under pressure and not sustainable. Sport England data shows [63 per cent of main sports halls and 60 per cent of swimming pools](#) are past their expected lifespans or overdue refurbishment creating financial pressures from maintenance backlogs and inefficient old buildings leading to increased utilities costs.
- Ageing leisure centres are costly to run and contribute up [to 40 per cent](#) of some district councils' carbon footprint. A 2024 [ukactive survey](#) shows 24 per cent of council areas are at risk of closing or reducing leisure services due to ongoing pressures from high energy and operational costs.