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The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA
14th October 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

After months of campaigning based upon a strong and compelling case, I write to implore you to approve financial support that has already been requested to the Treasury to secure the recovery of the public leisure sector. I also write to request that central and local government decisions to close leisure centres are paused until proper consultation with stakeholders has taken place based upon all the data and evidence that is available.

If immediate action is not taken, valuable public facilities at the hearts of our communities and 1,000's of jobs will be lost, particularly in the most deprived areas of the country where the services provided are arguably needed the most to help close the widening inequalities gap. The case to support public leisure is strong and compelling, because public leisure delivers the benefit of supporting the health and wellbeing of the nation, which has never before been so important as you have personally stated given the need to stay active and healthy to combat the risk of COVID-19. Significantly, it also delivers an enormous economic benefit through generating £billions in social value and savings to the NHS and social services in avoidable costs.

Public leisure facilities play a vital role in supporting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the population by providing affordable access to swimming, gym / group exercise and recreational sport. They also provide a home for 1,000's of community sports clubs and community groups who deliver unrivalled social value to the communities they serve. Evidence suggests the nation's physical activity levels are dropping from an already unsatisfactory level and obesity coupled with inactivity related health conditions are on the rise. Particularly stark is inactivity for people with disabilities and health conditions, and for many of these groups, the preferred environment for safe and effective physical activity is in public leisure facilities.

Most public leisure facilities have reopened to serve their communities, although a significant number remain closed. For many reopening will prove a false dawn because although they continue to work hard to build consumer confidence and to optimize participation in adapted safe environments to achieve a viable operating position, continued operation is with a deficit funding model which is unsustainable. Public leisure is therefore trying to deal with an existential financial challenge brought about by COVID-19. This case has been made continuously without decisive action being taken by the government. Back in July a parliamentary DCMS select committee report into the impact of COVID-19 said urgency was needed to protect public leisure, following this in September Baroness Tanni Grey-Thomson (Chair of ukactive) wrote to you, as did more recently, Marc Woods (Chair of CIMSPA) to highlight the plight of public leisure and the case for financial support to secure the recovery of the sector. Also, in a letter from Cllr Judith Vivienne



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Blake CBE (Chair of the Core Cities and Leader of Leeds City Council) to the Minister for Housing Communities and Local Government in September the issues were clearly highlighted, and it was acknowledged that councils are working together with their leisure providers and that delays to recovery funding would increase the overall cost to local government in the longer term.

Although I am writing on behalf of the wider public leisure sector, I also need to highlight the plight of leisure trusts who make up circa 50% of public leisure provision nationwide. In partnership with local councils, trusts operate on a non-profit basis with a mission that is rooted in addressing health inequalities. Trusts therefore endeavour to maximise the health and social value of the public leisure assets they manage, for example, by providing concessionary services and bespoke services to support people with long term health conditions and disabilities. Trusts have been hit particularly hard during the COVID-19 pandemic because they are not eligible for most of the government support packages, and because they are charities mostly operating on a break even basis which means they do not have the capability to repay business interruption loans. Trusts are also bound by charity law to hold limited reserves, which are consequently all but depleted leaving many trusts facing imminent insolvency.

The introduction of the government's three tier system to control the spread of COVID-19 risks exacerbating the situation should leisure be forced to close under tier three at the discretion of local government, as in the Liverpool City Region. We believe there is a clear and urgent need for government and local stakeholders to work together to review all the available scientific and operational evidence from our sector before any leisure centres are forced to close because of this system. We suggest forced closure is unnecessary because data from our sector indicates that the guidance that was co-produced with the government and SAGE has been implemented effectively, and there is an extremely low prevalence of COVID-19 in leisure centres.

The Treasury has had the research and data behind our sector's request for support and we need immediate action to provide recovery funding to protect the nation's leisure facility infrastructure, jobs, and the health and wellbeing of the population. We also need central and local government to pause decisions to close leisure centres until proper consideration of the available evidence takes place involving all stakeholders. We are not asking for a bail out; we are asking for funding to ensure the sector can remain viable throughout the recovery period. Recovery funding packages already introduced by the Welsh government and being developed by the Scottish government are welcomed but fall short, so a UK wide recovery fund is required with Barnett Consequentials. The rationale to provide funding is clear, public leisure is part of the solution to build resilience to COVID-19 and to help the nation's recovery so please approve our request.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Lockwood,
Chair, Community Leisure UK.