

## Consultation Report - October 2020

### The Future of Public Leisure

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. This report is a summary of anonymised discussions that took place with regard to the future of public leisure. Four one hour online consultation webinars took place between 12 October and 19 October 2020. Three of the sessions involved Community Leisure UK member Chief Executive Officers (total of 18) and the final session involved a mix of independent experts with a variety of experience, including health improvement, sport / physical activity development and academic research (total of six). The consultation sessions involved a facilitated group discussion using key lines of inquiry as a guide for discussion and reporting.

1.2. We thank our members and invited experts who gave up their valuable time to contribute to this consultation. The group discussions were very interesting, insightful and informative. The valuable insights gained will inform ongoing discussions with partners and Community Leisure UK strategy and planning decisions.

#### 1.3. Key lines of enquiry:

- What is the purpose and vision of leisure going forward?
- What are the prevailing challenges and opportunities?

#### 1.4. Factors influencing the key lines of enquiry:

- Efficiency (resilience and sustainability of the sector)
- Effectiveness (quality and impact of the sector )
- Partnerships (client and the wider public and private sector)
- Workforce (practitioners and leadership)

#### 2. SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS MADE

##### 2.1. Purpose and vision

2.1.1. Services that many leisure providers offer deliver important health and social outcomes that go beyond the recreational value of leisure.

- 2.1.2. Leisure possesses the opportunity to contribute to the delivery of wider public policy outcomes and closing the inequalities gap.
- 2.1.3. There is a degree of dissonance with regard to the purpose, vision and value of leisure by leisure providers, the public and stakeholders.
- 2.1.4. Leisure trusts offer an important vehicle for local authorities to deliver their leisure and cultural services, surplus revenue generated is reinvested to deliver charitable aims by cross subsidising programmes, access and facilities.

## **2.2. Challenges**

- 2.2.1. Competitive contract tendering in the public sector, coupled with austerity has led to leisure provider accountability being focussed on reducing operational costs which is driving the prioritisation of commercial returns over delivering social value.
- 2.2.2. Leisure is non statutory, arguably associating lower value and status relative to other statutory services which in turn results in proportionally more budget reductions.
- 2.2.3. Grouping public leisure as part of a wider homogeneous fitness sector devalues public leisure and underplays the challenges it faces.
- 2.2.4. Leisure services vary considerably, but the common perception of leisure is that of a facility operations service over a service that delivers interventions for community benefit.
- 2.2.5. The nation's leisure assets are aging and appropriate levels of capital investment are required in order to optimise efficiency and effectiveness.
- 2.2.6. Leisure is not always seen as a credible provider for wider public policy outcomes and attracting support from stakeholders, including the NHS, is viewed as challenging.
- 2.2.7. The need to reduce costs is driving down relative pay rates and eroding terms and conditions of employment, this is adversely impacting upon the recruitment and retention of high quality people.
- 2.2.8. There has been a reduction in specific leisure service expertise held by Council clients, sometimes causing contract management to be unnecessarily challenging and problematic.
- 2.2.9. Public leisure does not have a dedicated accountable agency to represent and advocate its purpose and value to the government.

## **2.3. Opportunities**

- 2.3.1. Make explicit and raise awareness of the role of public leisure to contribute to physical and mental health and wellbeing in order to help increase healthy life expectancy and contribute to closing the inequalities gap.

- 2.3.2. Coalesce national partners around a vision and purpose for leisure and create a national group / body that can represent and advocate the purpose and value of public leisure to the government and contribute to the effective coordination of scarce public sector resources.
- 2.3.3. Develop a manifesto for change and / or a national vision and strategy for leisure, identifying opportunities to better impact on wider public policy outcomes, including health and wellbeing, and to provide a framework through which to attract investment.
- 2.3.4. Develop a national delivery framework with local flexibility to ensure services are complementary to meet local need, and to maximise the value of collaboration with a wider network of local service provision.
- 2.3.5. Develop and universally implement national standards for all aspects of leisure service delivery (including professional workforce standards) to improve effectiveness and credibility with stakeholders.
- 2.3.6. Deliver a public awareness campaign to raise awareness that leisure is safe and essential and delivers wider value for community benefit.
- 2.3.7. Lobby for leisure to become a statutory or essential duty to protect a level of provision that might be at risk for community benefit, for example swimming pools, and to encourage commissioners to invest in leisure assets to contribute to a wider range of public policy outcomes.
- 2.3.8. Lobby for investment in ageing facilities and support the strategic consolidation of estates (when appropriate) to create self sustaining, non subsidy / grant reliant operational models upon which cross subsidised services can be introduced and developed.

### **3. DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

#### **3.1. What is the purpose and vision of leisure going forward?**

- 3.1.1. Leisure has an image and identity crisis which has, to an extent, been further exposed during the COVID-19 crisis as a consequence of being grouped with the private fitness sector, and also the wider hospitality sector. Although leisure trusts recognise themselves as delivering services that primarily support health and wellbeing, arguably they are commonly perceived as having a narrower focus on gym exercise serving specific demographics with a profit orientated motive. Stock fitness images used by supply agencies and displayed in leisure facilities are not helping the image of public leisure, images can be more reflective of the community and many leisure providers are adopting this approach. The reality is,

leisure trusts provide a wide range of services<sup>1</sup> to meet the needs of local communities. Work is aligned to charitable objectives and barriers to participation are addressed which make leisure trusts distinct from the private sector, such as community outreach work, extended levels of support for target groups and concessionary pricing. Grouping public leisure as part of a wider homogeneous fitness sector devalues public leisure (particularly leisure trusts) and underplays the specific challenges it faces.

- 3.1.2. If leisure is to be successful in attracting investment necessary to develop and sustain facilities and services, greater clarity is required around the problem that leisure is endeavouring to fix. Leisure needs to clarify its purpose, vision and identity. Leisure is made up of a broad range of facilities and services and there is a risk of leisure endeavouring to be all things to all people. In the context of achieving reductions in demand and therefore savings for the NHS and social services, the purpose of public leisure is primarily viewed by members as aligned with health and wellbeing to help increase healthy life expectancy and contribute to closing the inequalities gap.
- 3.1.3. The name leisure does not reflect the scope, nor the potential of the service. There is a progressive shift by members towards leisure being associated with a wellness service, a service that can be the first line of defence for the NHS. Similarly, members view appropriately designed and operated leisure facilities likened to wellness centres or community wellbeing hubs, for example Live Wire's [Great Sankey Neighbourhood Hub](#).
- 3.1.4. Members suggest the delivery of leisure services by leisure trusts has led to an evolution of the service model towards a purpose and value beyond purely recreation. However, leisure is not always seen as a credible provider for wider public policy outcomes, and attracting support from stakeholders, including the NHS and Sport England, is viewed as challenging. Although there are exemplary services and evidence to support that leisure can be the first line of defence for the NHS, connecting and partnering with the NHS / public health is perceived to be difficult. Work is therefore required to enable leisure to become a credible service provider and a partnership opportunity by the NHS, and to support programme delivery from national sector partners, including Sport England. Members are not deterred by this, they are of the opinion that they

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<sup>1</sup> Community Leisure UK members' manage facilities including: swimming pools, libraries, museums, pitches, gyms, ice arenas, beach fronts, parks, heritage buildings and children's centres. Importantly, members deliver vital community services such as exercise or books on prescription, short breaks for disabled children, adult social care support programmes, walking programmes, internet access courses, apprenticeships and training, and sports participation programmes.

should not wait to be approached, instead endeavours should continue to build working relationships with the NHS and national partners. The appointment of a Minister for Wellness (as recommended by the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales) could help advocate leisure and its wider purpose and potential, coupled with iconic national figures to raise awareness of the potential leisure has to offer.

3.1.5. Faced with an inactive nation and growing dire consequences for public health, public leisure offers the opportunity to glean valuable insights using lived experiences from providing a broad range of services in communities across the nation that attract a broad range of demographics. These lived experiences could be better utilised to contribute to ongoing service improvement and partnership work with wider stakeholders. Leisure provides opportunities for people to be active, but also to be socially connected which is an implicit part of the value proposition of leisure, something that is often underplayed. Social connection is accepted as one of the key components of maintaining good health and wellbeing.

3.1.6. Public leisure services provide opportunities for significant proportions of the population to be active and socially connect, essential to health and wellbeing, but this does not appear to be fully understood by the government. For example, the government message since the COVID-19 pandemic began to stay active and healthy is, to a degree, contradictory given the time it has taken to receive a significantly reduced amount of relief funding compared to what was requested to support facilities to reopen and stay open. The shift in emphasis from government, national sector agencies and membership bodies to physical activity over sport is an opportunity for leisure. More can be done to promote leisure's work and role to support active healthy lifestyles in addition to sport and fitness. Also, many leisure trusts are not recognised as charitable bodies by stakeholders and the general public, often perceived as council departments or private businesses which can distort expectations and create barriers to engagement and support.

### **3.2. What are the prevailing challenges and opportunities?**

3.2.1. Competitive contract tendering in the public sector, coupled with austerity (which has resulted in the need for Councils to reduce leisure service operators management fees) has led to leisure provider accountability being focussed on optimising the net costs of operation. This has led to leisure provider accountability being focussed on reducing operational costs which is driving the prioritisation of commercial returns over delivering social value and

work to help address the growing inequalities gap. Going forward there is a shared public sector opportunity to optimise the value of the nations leisure assets and secure their value during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis. Optimising costs can be achieved through scale, which can be generated through partnerships as well as by contracting with larger leisure providers. For example, the federal approach to partnership working being explored by GMActive in Greater Manchester as part of a sub regional strategic leisure trust partnership network. This approach serves to achieve economies of scale but at the same time it retains the unique value of smaller single contract leisure providers.

- 3.2.2. In principle the non-profit leisure sector (i.e. leisure trusts and the [trust model](#)) can deliver outstanding social value, balancing efficiency with effectiveness using cross subsidy to ensure socially valuable services are prioritised and appropriately resourced to support people and communities most in need. So, by measuring social value<sup>2</sup> and evidencing returns on investment the trust model can seek protection and further development opportunities. Work with 4global using the social value calculator is a key opportunity going forward to measure social value, actionable insights can be gleaned to develop services and improve impact, particularly in areas experiencing the most deprivation to help address inequalities.
- 3.2.3. As social enterprises leisure trusts are committed to maximizing social value, but it is important the conditions are created to strike the appropriate balance between the social and the enterprise elements, i.e. create an impactful model, deliverable at scale, based upon generating commercial returns that can cross subsidise targeted or concessionary services. This model can be efficient, effective and sustainable. Under the right conditions for change, or more so transformation, leisure could play a more significant part within the public sector to deliver more and better public policy outcomes for a reduced net cost to the public finances.
- 3.2.4. There is a real desire amongst trusts to be creative and innovative; trusts thrive on the freedom to innovate and to make business decisions quickly. However, to achieve transformation, arguably more progressive partnerships are necessary and the prevailing

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<sup>2</sup> The 4global social value calculator considers the associated impact on health, wellbeing, educational attainment and reduced crime as a result of participation in leisure services. Analysis of participation across 2,700 public leisure facilities indicates that public leisure generates £3.9 billion of social value. Target groups participating generate an increased level of social value, so by targeting participation from underrepresented groups and by providing specific interventions and community outreach programmes social value can be increased.

operating conditions and culture needs to be reset. Relationships between councils and leisure providers are in the main transactional in nature i.e. standard contracts with evaluation of outputs. There is an opportunity to shift to a more values based partnership, underpinned by codesign with progressive leadership behaviours to initiate and maintain this way of working. A risk to this shift is the reduction in specific leisure service expertise held by Council clients, which conversely is sometimes causing contract management to be unnecessarily challenging and problematic.

- 3.2.5. Leisure plays a significant role in supporting the nation to be physically active, with up half of the population choosing to take their exercise indoors. However, the risk of COVID-19 spreading outdoors is far less than indoors, so there is an opportunity for leisure providers to further develop and connect the outdoors to the indoor offer to create a safe and sustainable service model. This can, at the same time, impact on a greater proportion of the population. A public awareness campaign to raise awareness that leisure is safe and essential and delivers wider value for community benefit is an important opportunity for consideration.
- 3.2.6. The need to reduce costs is driving down relative pay rates and eroding terms and conditions of employment, this is adversely impacting upon the recruitment and retention of high quality people into the sector. Workforce development is viewed as critical for leisure to become a credible provider of early intervention and prevention services that can effectively support the NHS and social services. Leisure attracts highly motivated and capable people to work as fitness and specialist exercise practitioners, but they do not sit equally alongside NHS Allied Health Professionals and therefore arguably lack equivalent status and credibility. Leisure can work towards aligning terminology, service standards and professional development to the wider health and wellbeing sector. In this way opportunities to create professional standards for practitioners working in leisure to become Allied Health Professionals when their job roles are aligned to supporting the wider dimensions of health and wellbeing can be explored. Quality is not managed and measured consistently sector wide, this is something to improve upon. The development and universal implementation of national standards for all aspects of leisure service delivery can improve effectiveness and credibility with stakeholders, including professional workforce standards, which will also improve recruitment and retention of high quality people.
- 3.2.7. A national strategy for leisure could identify the shared purpose and vision for the sector, and outline opportunities to better impact on wider public policy outcomes, primarily health and wellbeing. A

strategy would provide a framework to manage robust evaluation of the sector's performance against a set of shared measurable objectives. This could serve to identify public leisure's role as a delivery service for wider public policy outcomes, and therefore be key to attracting government investment. Members' views on the merits of a national strategy are mixed, there is a concern that a national strategy might inhibit the design and delivery of services to meet local priorities. A national delivery framework with local flexibility to ensure services are complementary to meet local needs, and to maximise the value of collaboration with a wider network of local service provision is an important consideration. Alternatively, a manifesto for change, rather than a strategy, might be a first step to help leisure define the potential, and to demonstrate how leisure can be accountable for contributing to a wider range of public policy outcomes.

- 3.2.8. Public leisure does not have a dedicated accountable agency to represent and advocate its purpose. There is a need / opportunity to coalesce national partners around a vision and purpose for leisure to create a national group / agency that can represent and advocate its purpose and value to the government, and assist with the improved coordination of scarce public sector resources. Such a group / agency is necessary to own a national strategy / manifesto for leisure. Membership organisations are arguably not appropriate because by definition they represent members, government backed national agencies such as Sport England might be better placed.
- 3.2.9. Aging facilities and facilities that no longer attract sufficient footfall are unsustainable given increasing financial pressures. Leverage of government capital funding is key to achieving efficiency and effectiveness to upgrade facilities and to enable the consolidation of estates (when appropriate) to create self sustaining, non subsidy / grant reliant operational models upon which cross subsidised services can be introduced and developed.
- 3.2.10. Leisure services vary considerably, but the common perception of leisure is that of a facility operations service more than a service that delivers interventions for community benefit. Although there are exemplar services being provided by leisure trusts focusing on health and wellbeing, work to raise awareness of exemplary services could be improved along a common and robust approach to evaluation. This would assist with opportunities to scale and further develop services. However, although there are many examples of efficient and effective services within the leisure sector, there is room for improvement. Leisure could look deeper within itself to find and acknowledge it's weaknesses. Leisure

providers are undoubtedly under pressure to focus on commercial returns to sustain the safe function of leisure assets and core services, however, this focus can detract from progressive thinking that might assist leisure to better engage with wider stakeholders to codesign services that can successfully help tackle inequalities.

- 3.2.11. The [Welsh National Exercise Referral Scheme](#) (NERS) exemplifies the opportunity that standardisation can bring to delivering with scale and quality, as does the Greater Manchester [Prehab4Cancer](#) service. However, funding for early intervention and prevention services is scarce and mostly fixed term. Members suggest a greater portion of NHS funding should be directed to such services on an invest to save basis. Exercise referral has the potential to become a UK wide programme with multiple pathways, including corporate and self referral mechanisms into community and cultural activities to improve physical and mental health. Such a scheme should be designed and developed with the health sector and relevant delivery and research partners based upon existing evidence of what works.
- 3.2.12. Leisure is non statutory, arguably associating lower value and status relative to other statutory services which in turn results in proportionally more budget reductions. Lobbying for leisure to become a statutory duty could serve to protect a level of provision that might be at risk for community benefit, for example swimming pools, and could encourage commissioners to invest in leisure assets to contribute to a wider range of public policy outcomes. However, members have reservations, for example with regard to public libraries / archives, statutory is not ideal as it brings added accountability and bureaucracy which can be restraining. Essential status might therefore be a preferred option for leisure to lobby for, which arguably avoids the unwanted implications of leisure becoming a statutory duty whilst retaining certain advantages that could lead to the protection and further development of services.

## 4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1. The perspectives shared by our members and independent experts summarised in this report will inform internal Community Leisure UK discussions that will contribute to shaping organisational strategy and plans going forward. The perspectives will also inform ongoing discussions being undertaken with ukactive and other national partners, as well as the content for the Community Leisure UK members conference on 8 December 2020.