



**How Charities and Social
Enterprises can deliver
efficient, effective and
sustainable people-
focused public leisure
and culture services**

An introduction

As we move through the process of Local Government Reorganisation across England, with the establishment of new local authorities, there will be opportunities to reflect on the delivery of services. We believe that there is no single model that will suit across the country with differences in geography and demographics informing community needs.

This booklet is intended to spotlight a few examples of how authorities can work with social enterprises and charities for the delivery of efficient, effective and sustainable people-focused public leisure and culture services.

With growing demographic pressures, we need to both protect and future-proof existing services with proven impact.

- Our first case study highlights the partnership approach between South Gloucestershire Council and Circadian Trust, focused on alignment of strategic plans, collaboration and community benefit as the core purpose.
- Our second case study explores the approach in North East Lincolnshire where the unitary authority identified a need to do things differently and has now been working closely with our member Lincs Inspire to deliver leisure and culture services, using the expertise and determination of the charitable trust to ensure public funds are used to support the delivery of the authority's outcomes.
- Our final case study focuses on the pressure many local authorities are facing with the rising demand for SEND provision, which is an increasingly challenging statutory duty for local authorities. Horizon Leisure Trust has developed a whole-organisation model of inclusion that supports the delivery of the council's Active Wellbeing Strategy, and the value of this work and relationship will be important in the new unitary authority.



The examples in this booklet are just a snapshot of the breadth of services and programmes delivered by charitable leisure and culture trusts. You can find more examples and greater insight into the social value and impact of Charities and Social Enterprises on our Seriously Social Campaign page here:



seriouslysocial.org.uk

If you'd like to speak to us about the case studies in this brochure please email us at:

contact@communityleisureuk.org

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K Cumming".

Kirsty Cumming,

CEO, Community Leisure UK

Case study 1 – Circadian Trust

A long-term partnership with South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority

Circadian Trust manages and operates 5 Active Lifestyle Centres across South Gloucestershire. The service is co-created and delivered in partnership with South Gloucestershire Council, a unitary authority, under a long-term lease arrangement until 2041. The Council retains landlord responsibility for structural repairs and major plant replacement.

They are commissioned by Place, Public Health and Children & Adult Services to deliver specialised services including weight management on referral, free swimming in pregnancy and refugees and play support for looked after children and others identified as in need.

Following a commitment from the Trust to reducing its management fee, it is no longer funded by the local authority and now pays the council rent for the facilities they operate. It accesses funding from national programmes (e.g. Sport England initiatives), and has worked proactively with the Council over time, jointly investing in facilities, restructuring and co-designing services.



"If we are serious about **prevention, health equality and value for money**, we must treat community leisure services as essential public health assets — and support mission led social enterprises like Circadian Trust to deliver them."

- Simon Johnson, South Gloucestershire Council Cabinet Spokesperson for Children and Young People

The long-term nature of the contract provides the Trust with stability for strategic investment and confidence to innovate. Its trustees are local people, with opportunities for up to 3 councillors to also serve as trustees.

Circadian Trust's model was designed through:

- Close collaboration with South Gloucestershire Council
- Analysis of population health needs and usage data
- Engagement with users, community groups and staff
- Learning from national best practice in charitable leisure trusts



The operating model embeds:

- Community benefit as the primary purpose
- Cross subsidisation to protect affordable access (e.g. swimming lessons and memberships help "fund" otherwise loss making / marginal activities.)
- Alignment of the Trust's strategic plans with the Council's plans
- Complete open book accounting on the contract which enables:
 - Reinvestment of all surpluses into facilities, programmes and people
 - Flexibility to pilot and adapt services in response to local need
 - Submission of full annual business plan in advance of the financial year and full quarterly management accounts prior to each quarterly monitoring meeting.

The operational strength of a commercial operator with a social conscience

Circadian Trust integrates fitness, wellbeing, social connection and skills development, to reach people commercial providers cannot, and align leisure provision with NHS prevention priorities. Its model addresses some shortcomings of other models, including:

- Council run services faced unsustainable cost pressures, including operating subsidy, maintenance and operational equipment replacement expenditure.
 - If the delivery model had not changed, the estimated 2026 cost to South Gloucestershire Council to operate 5 leisure centres would be £2.6m per annum if operated on the same basis.
 - The change to the trust model from in-house delivery led to an immediate saving of £610k (£1.08m in today's values) due to NNDR and tax efficiencies.
- Commercial operators prioritised profitability, limiting access for low income or high need groups.
- Fragmented commissioning and a lack of understanding of the public leisure sector led to limited integration with health and community services.

The Trust's key innovation is reframing leisure services as preventative public health infrastructure, delivered through a mission led, not for profit social enterprise.

For every £1 the Trust invests, it generates £2 in health and social value, reducing long-term public-sector costs. It increased its social value year-on-year with £32 million social value achieved in 2025/26.

The Trust has achieved facility investment without additional council capital spending. Since 2006, Circadian Trust has invested over £22 million in facility and service improvements, including major refurbishment projects costing over £9 million at four of the five sites.

The commissioned referral programmes have increased to over 2500 participants per annum in 2025/26, a 105% increase compared to 2 years ago. They have increased participation of under-represented groups, including:

- Choices for You (Adults with learning difficulties)
- Breakthrough Mentoring (Young People at risk of dropping out of education)
- Play on Prescription (looked after children and others at risk, identified by children's services)
- Weight Management on Referral (particularly family groups and males)



Key impact metrics for 2025/2026:

- 28,000 residents subscribe through monthly membership and swimming lessons (c. 10% of the South Gloucestershire population).
- 2.5 million annual physical activity visits across Active Lifestyle Centres. Over 4 million total visits.
- Annual investment of £7.7 million in local employment for 600+ people, with a 76% staff retention rate.

Case study 2 – Lincs Inspire

Shared purpose key to active wellbeing partnership with North East Lincolnshire Unitary Authority

Lincs Inspire was formed by North East Lincolnshire Unitary Authority in 2014. Their shared purpose ensures collaboration across leisure and culture services, and works collaboratively with the Council, health, education and VCSE sectors. Their partnership work ranges from collaboration with 40+ GP/medical centres, NHS Stroke services, referral programmes co-produced with health professionals, and working with special educational needs schools and colleges to create the best start in life for children.

The leisure and cultural trust was originally developed by North East Lincolnshire Council. Historically leisure centres and a cultural venue were outsourced by the local authority to commercial operators, introducing external expertise and seeking cost efficiencies.

As approaches to leisure changed, recognition for their beneficial contribution towards health improvement and wellbeing became more apparent. The natural end dates for outsourced contracts provided a useful opportunity to explore new options and realign these services to the local authority's emerging priorities.

Lincs Inspire has a 25-year Partnership Agreement in place, covering the operation of services, with public assets retained and maintained by the local authority. Contract funding focuses on statutory services, i.e. libraries and providing a contribution towards the provision of outdoor spaces.

Lincs Inspire's model was designed through:

- Research, market testing and learning from other trusts concluding that the preferred approach was to develop a local trust, focused on local need.
- An opportunity to include other similar customer facing services, such as Libraries, Public Archives, and outdoor sports facilities to support health and wellbeing, alongside economy of scale.
- Efficiency and agility, ensuring services have flexibility to change promptly and meet demand, not restricted by annual budgets.
- Flexibility to diversify income generation, alongside potential to attract external funding.
- Development of shared objectives within the partnership agreement.

The transfer of services commenced in 2013 and Lincs Inspire became an independent trust in 2015, achieving charitable status the following year, alongside establishing a not-for-profit trading subsidiary.

Ongoing partnership to achieve efficiencies

North East Lincolnshire Unitary Authority has benefitted from ongoing financial savings and avoided increasing service costs through Lincs Inspire's efficiencies, including management of national minimum wage increases, changes to employer national insurance contributions, taxation, and inflation for goods and services.

The trust model is based on profitable services cross-subsiding community facilities. The largest leisure facility's patronage enables the Trust to support a smaller community-based swimming pool and outdoor sports facilities that run at a loss but are vital community assets.

The Trust-operated leisure and culture services work closely together and look

for opportunities to overlay resources to increase engagement and maximise efficiency, unrestricted by sector boundaries or complicated finance structures. This is demonstrated through the management of the area's largest live performance venue, which can now balance the reliance on a touring product with building community relationships, generating a sense of local pride alongside much needed income to sustain the venue.

Further economies are achieved through the maintenance of assets by the Council's in-house property services and network of approved suppliers. The Council's buying power benefits the trust via their energy purchasing, and the trust buys in IT services from the Council.



Key achievements include:

- Annual investment of c. £6.5 million from the trust, supporting local employment for c. 450 people, including full and part-time opportunities, access to training and apprenticeships.
- The dedicated wellness hub is one of the largest centres in England for assisted exercise equipment, operating at 95% capacity and supporting a range of physical and mental health conditions.
- Across leisure, sport, entertainment and libraries, engagement exceeding 1.2 million attendances per annum.
- 42,460 annual attendances of the assisted exercise programme in 2025/26, up from 2,738 in 2014/15.
- Development of an 'earn while you learn' programme designed to increase swim teaching capacity while recognising the cost of training courses, providing flexibility and assurance of employment.
- Delivery of a 'Wellness to Work' programme, enabling employers to refer a member of staff into the Trust services for support that aids recovery from physical and mental health illness and injury, typically reducing absence duration and rebuilding confidence.
- Work with the local authority to deliver an extensive school holiday activities programme with c. 4,000 attendances per annum.

Change is a given, the trust model enables services to test ideas, co-produce with local communities, and adapt and respond.



Case study 3 – Horizon Leisure

Delivering home education and SEND provision through public leisure

Horizon Leisure Trust operates high-quality leisure and wellbeing facilities across Hampshire and Surrey, including three leisure centres in the Havant area and a Wellbeing Hub within a local shopping centre.

Their centres welcome more than 1.2 million visits a year and generate an estimated £11.1 million in social value, that's £310 for every person who uses them!

Through their Home Education and SEND programmes, Horizon directly supports Havant Borough Council in delivering the Borough's Active Wellbeing Strategy. Neither programme relies on grant funding.

Instead, through the financial surpluses Horizon generates, these services are subsidised as part of mainstream programming by the charitable trust investing in community provision and removing barriers to participation.

Home education is rising sharply, government census data from Autumn 2023 estimated 92,000 children in England were home-educated, with projections of up to 126,000 at any point during 2023/24, around 1 in 100 school-aged children.

Many of these families struggle to meet National Curriculum PE requirements and to find the regular social contact that children outside the school system can otherwise miss.

Horizon's home education programme:

- Was co-designed by listening to home-educating families, introducing more day-time provision and flexible PE-based sessions based on individual children's needs.
- Has grown 78% in just 12 months' time (2025-26), now delivering 15 weekly classes and engaging 110 children across two sites.
- Is self-sustaining through an affordable monthly direct debit of £15 per family. Free public swimming at all other times is included.
- Has strong and widespread demand, with people traveling up to an hour across the wider Hampshire area.



Community leisure providers are ready to deliver at scale. As Local Government Reorganisation reshapes services, there is an opportunity for new unitary authorities to recognise and embed trusted providers like Horizon as formal partners from the outset.

SEND provision in partnership with a charitable leisure trust

Nationally, a record 19.5% of school pupils now have identified special educational needs (DfE, 2024/25). Locally the picture is just as stark: more than 20,000 children and young people in Hampshire now have an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan, the formal support arrangement for those with the greatest needs, up 17% in the past year alone (2026). Behind those figures is a markedly greater local need for provision that is accessible and inclusive.

Recognising that gap, Horizon worked with families and local groups, including the Hampshire Parent Carer network, to

develop tailored, inclusive sessions where SEND residents of all ages can take part with confidence and feel part of community life.

In a single year since starting in 2025, Horizon has grown its SEND offer from 2 weekly sessions to 8, now reaching people of every age, from early years to adults aged 16 and over. That growth has been led by the community itself, with every session co-designed in response to identified local need, and demand already outstrips supply: the SEN Swim School is full, with a waiting list.



“Horizon plays a vital role in helping us deliver our Active Wellbeing Strategy, which aims to empower people, particularly those facing the greatest inequalities, to lead healthier, happier and more fulfilling lives. The creative and inclusive approach to programme design **ensures that residents of all ages and backgrounds can access services** at our leisure centres or through community-based initiatives.”

- Councillor Gillian Harris, Cabinet Lead for Regeneration and Communities, Havant Borough Council

Horizon's innovation is a whole-organisation model of inclusion, not a set of isolated SEND activities. Their whole-organisation approach includes:

- Bespoke Autism Awareness Training designed and delivered to staff, and extended to local sports clubs and providers.
- Membership of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme.
- SEND-friendly resources including Social Stories and Sensory Borrow Bags to help visitors prepare for activities.
- A Thrive Coach trained and experienced in supporting SEN within physical activity.

Horizon also created and fund a new Community Inclusion Officer role to reach the people and groups that leisure services typically engage least. The officer works directly in the community, building the trust and connections that bring in people who might otherwise be missed.

This integrated approach enables SEND residents to use mainstream facilities with confidence, while also benefiting from activities designed around their needs. It goes beyond meeting access requirements to create real opportunities for participation, independence and wellbeing.



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What makes a Charitable Trust unique?

There are three key differences between a Charitable Trust that manages public leisure and culture and the private sector model of delivery.

1

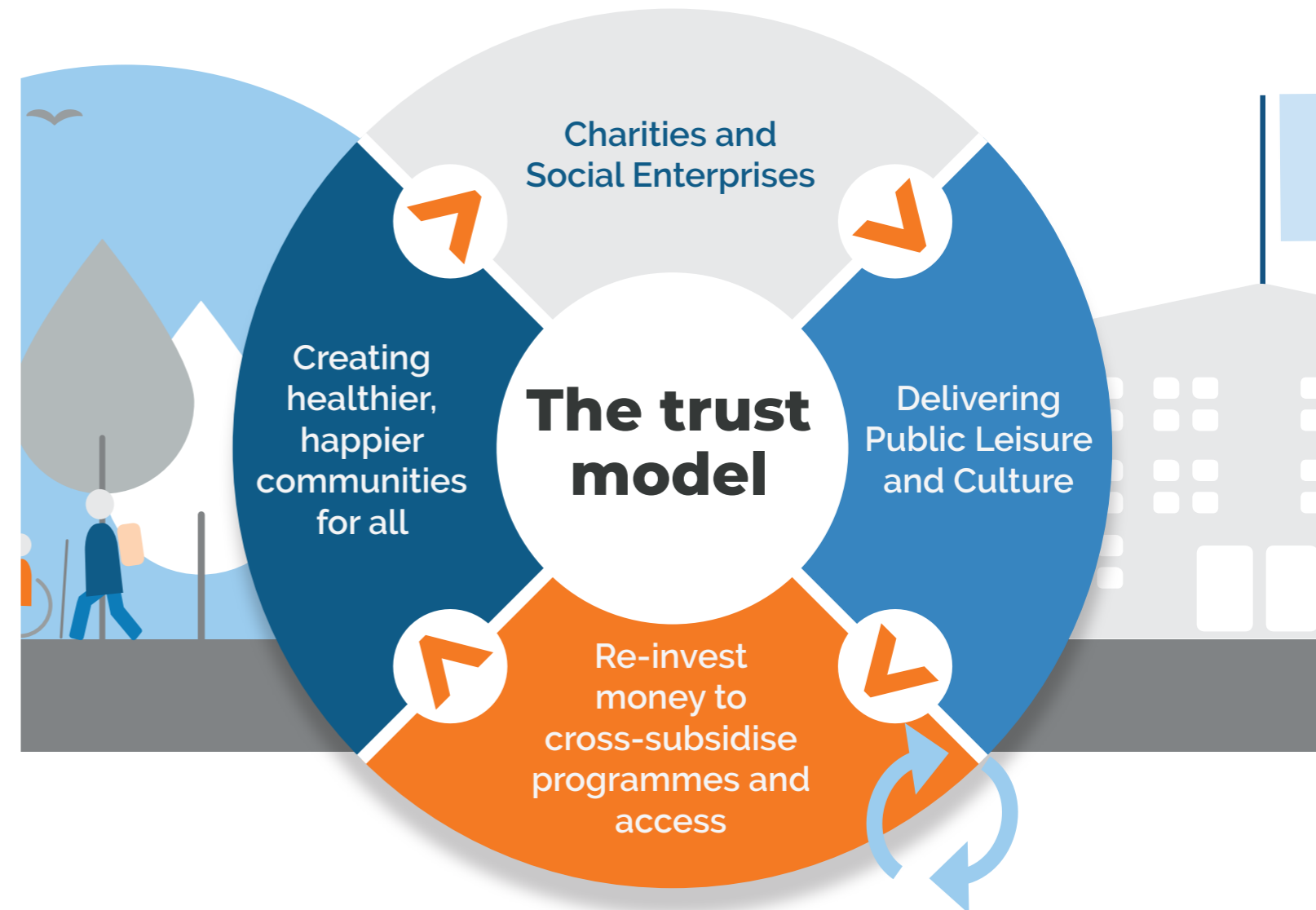
Our members unique cross-subsidy approach means they can re-invest surpluses generated to help them achieve their goal of helping everyone to live healthier, happier lives.

2

They are governed by local people via a board of trustees – helping to re-enforce community connection, ownership of services and greater transparency.

3

They are independent and free from control or influence of any profit distributing organisation, with no shareholders.



Our members can be trusted!

All members of Community Leisure UK comply with our Charter of Integrity. When local authorities work with a leisure and culture trust that is a member of Community Leisure UK, they have the assurance of working with a genuine charitable organisation.

Our Charter spells out good principles of operation and governance for charitable trusts. Crucially, they must invest or otherwise apply all surpluses to their charitable objectives. They are demonstrably independent and do not distribute revenues or dividends to shareholders or members.

If an organisation cannot comply with our Charter of Integrity, then we would not consider them to be a genuine Charitable Trust and they cannot be a member of Community Leisure UK.



Find out more about the Charitable Trust Model:

communityleisureuk.org/the-trust-model

Membership - Charter of Integrity

This Charter explains the criteria for membership of Community Leisure UK. This Charter determines the membership criteria which applicants need to establish when they join, and all Members are required to sustain throughout their membership.

All members of Community Leisure UK must be independent, not-for-profit charities or social enterprises operating physical activity, sport, cultural, leisure and recreation services and facilities for people and communities across the UK.

Membership - Charter of Integrity (cont'd)

Community Leisure UK members are required to conform to good principles of operation and governance, including the following specific criteria:

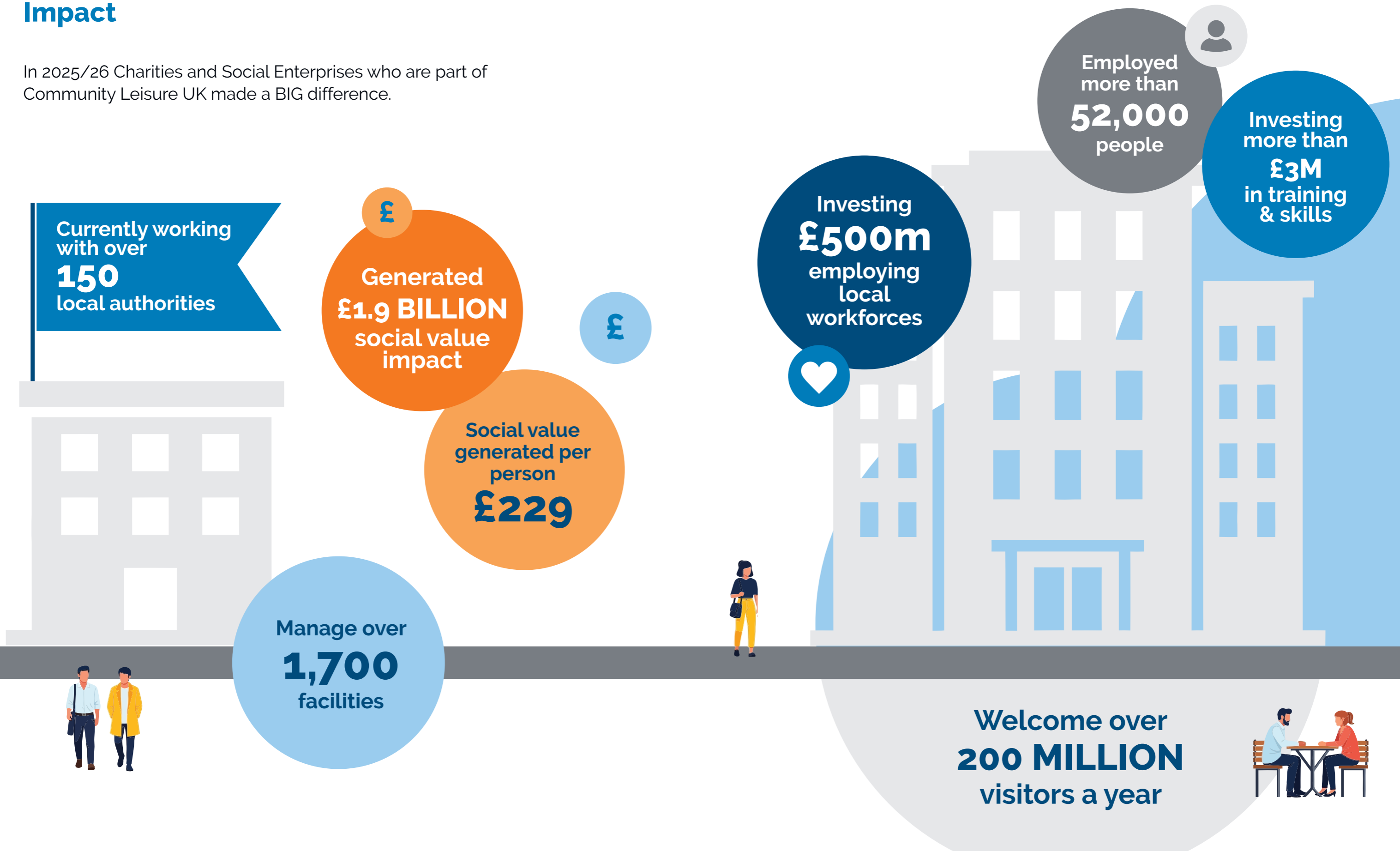
- 1 They will be independent from any partner, and free to make organisation and business decisions, without any contractual controlling powers.
- 2 They will not distribute revenues or dividends to shareholders or members but instead invest or otherwise apply all surpluses to their charitable objectives for the provision and support of leisure and culture facilities and services.
- 3 They will be demonstrably independent and free from control or influence of any profit distributing organisation – thus not a subsidiary of, or established by any profit distributing organisation.
- 4 All their contracts and agreements are entered into freely by or on behalf of the independent Directors without external control or influence; the contracts and agreements are equitable and have no onerous conditions and are open, competitive and demonstrate best value.
- 5 They will not enter into any contract and agreement which would benefit any Director, either directly or indirectly, including as a partner, shareholder Director or senior employee of a profit distributing organisation.
- 6 They will not have any other relationship with any profit distributing company or any organisation associated with such a company which results in surplus funds which would normally be reinvested within the organisation being prevented from being used in this way.
- 7 That if based in Scotland, prospective members can be recognised as an ALEO (arm's length external organisation) and registered with the Office of the Charity Regulator.

Community Leisure UK members will:

- 1 firmly commit themselves to these principles and criteria throughout their existence.
- 2 declare that they meet them when they apply for membership of Community Leisure UK.
- 3 supply Community Leisure UK with their Memorandum and Articles of Association and/or other appropriate documentation.

Impact

In 2025/26 Charities and Social Enterprises who are part of Community Leisure UK made a BIG difference.



*Statistics included in this brochure cover the full Community Leisure UK membership across England, Scotland and Wales. Social value figures produced by 4Global using data from DataHub and Moving Communities.

**Statistics contained within the Case Studies were provided by the individual Trust.

Our members support more people in areas of higher deprivation than the national average



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