

DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK: Survey findings on leisure centre closures and funding for leisure services

BRIEFING FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS



Please find enclosed a briefing from the District Councils' Network (DCN), which outlines recent survey findings on the impact Covid-19 has had on the financial sustainability of leisure centres, and the impact this will have on the provision of leisure services for districts in future. These services are critical in tackling health inequalities. As the findings show, many work in partnership with other local health services to provide tailored exercise and activity to those most in need of this type of referral.

As the cross-party network for 180 district councils that provide leisure services, we are calling on you to support our campaign for a leisure services rescue package to ensure these vital community services and facilities survive the pandemic. We also ask that the expertise and local knowledge that they hold is developed further to provide a comprehensive preventative health service that is integrated into the healthcare system

DCN'S KEY ASKS

Urgent and collaborative action must be taken to support leisure services to prevent providers from going bankrupt or offering reduced services and hours. We are asking parliamentarians to join us in calling for:

- A financial rescue package for leisure centres, in addition to the Government's National Leisure Recovery Fund to ensure leisure services survive the Covid-19 pandemic.
- District councils to be represented on the recreation and leisure COVID-19 roadmap taskforce, chaired by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
- A national leisure strategy, including all partners with a dedicated role for district councils, focused on the role of leisure services in combatting obesity and mental health crisis
- A full evaluation of the establishment, administration and delivery of the National Leisure Recovery Fund, and the support to leisure services through the income compensation scheme for lost sales, fees and charges

HOW CAN PARLIAMENTARIANS HELP?

We ask parliamentarians to help district councils in the following ways:

- Table parliamentary questions: we would be happy to provide suggested oral and written questions.
- Write to the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government calling for the Government to support leisure services by implementing DCN's key asks.
- Agree to a short, virtual meeting with the DCN to discuss the campaign.
- Call on HM Treasury, DMCS and MHCLG to take urgent action to draw up plans to support leisure services by raising the issue in Parliament.
- Support our application for a Backbench Business Debate: this will focus on the vital role that district councils play in building better lives and stronger economies.
- Become an officer of the APPG for District Councils: the APPG's next meeting and **AGM is taking place on Thursday the 27th May** and is a key voice for districts in Parliament.
- Meet with your local district leader and chief executive to discuss finance issues: the DCN is encouraging our members to engage more regularly and proactively with their local MP, and your support for this would be greatly appreciated.
- Speak up for districts in debates: we would be delighted if districts MP can advocate for the role of their local authorities in delivering the Government's objective of levelling up the country.
- Consider issuing a local press release to highlight concerns about local leisure services and your support.

HEADLINE FINDINGS FROM DCN'S SURVEY

In April 2021, DCN conducted a survey across 187 District Council Chief Executives.

This survey garnered some press attention, such as this piece from the [BBC](#), and this in [The Guardian](#).

POTENTIAL CLOSURE OF LEISURE CENTRES:

Based on the survey's findings, **DCN estimates unless urgent action is taken, over 100 leisure centres across the country will be forced to close due to lack of funds.**

- **Over a third** of councils said there was a *"likely need"* to close at least one leisure centre, with **25%** of those considering closures saying it was *"extremely likely"* they were going to close.
- Nearly **60%** of districts considering closures said they would be forced to close **within the next 12 months**.
- Of those looking to close leisure centres, **37%** were considering closing two centres, with **nearly 20%** considering **closing three or more leisure centres**.
- **19%** said they were likely to begin closing leisure centres within the next **three months**, increasing to **35%** within the next **nine months**.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INCOME AND ASSOCIATED SERVICES:

- Across DCN's 180 district members, net income from centres is expected to be **£325m** less than in 2019/20.
- If there is no additional Government financial support, **78%** of respondents believed there will be a decrease in associated delivery services provided to the community such as creche services, over 50s/60s activities and exercise referral schemes at leisure centres that are able to remain open over the next year.

CONCERNS BY DISTRICT COUNCILS ON PRESSURES FACED BY LEISURE SERVICES:

- The most cited concern expressed by councils in the survey was that operators and councils will have to prioritise primary income streams at the expense of subsidised activities and targeted programmes. This will have a detrimental impact on exercise referral and social prescription projects at a time when supporting physical health (obesity) and mental health should be the priority.
- Another common comment was the acute need for further funding over the next year and beyond to mitigate the impact of social distancing measures and likely wavering customer confidence over the next 12-18 months.
- There was great concern expressed on potential operator failure and the need to contemplate bringing services in-house if this occurs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEISURE CENTRES IN TACKLING HEALTH AND WELLBEING ISSUES

It is clear that leisure centres, and their associated services, have played a vital role in tackling health and wellbeing inequalities and in preventative health schemes. The survey found that over the last five years:

- **79%** of leisure centres had been utilised in social prescription programmes.
- **98%** of leisure centres had been utilised in specific schemes promoting physical activity
- **94%** of leisure centres had been utilised in schemes to tackle health inequalities.
- **88%** of leisure centres had been utilised in projects to improve mental health.

- 84% confirmed their leisure centres had been utilised in projects aimed at 'hard to reach' community members.
- 65% confirmed their leisure centres had been utilised in projects addressing loneliness.
- The survey also showed that centres have played a smaller, but important role in the rollout of the vaccination programme, with 22% of councils confirming that centres had been used to deliver Covid-19 vaccinations.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LEISURE SERVICES AND RISK TO OBESITY

The Value of Leisure Services

In addition to serving as critical public health partners to the Government, districts deliver leisure services that keep people out of our overstretched and expensive health and social care systems. The Kings Fund recently found the leisure services provided by districts create up to £23 in value for every £1 invested. District councils also know that leisure and sport are significant contributors to our local economies, drawing people into town centres, creating spaces for community and enterprise and supporting our local businesses. We believe leisure will be critical to the recovery effort and improving the health of people in our communities.

The Health Challenge

Districts believe leisure services are more important than ever as the latest figures show that the majority of adults in England are overweight or obese: 67% of men and 60% of women. With inactivity having increased as a result of the current restrictions, DCN is warning that leisure centres will be needed more than ever as we come out of the lockdown and the pandemic, to get an inactive Britain going again and to stop pressure being heaped on the NHS and social care systems in the future.

The Leisure Opportunity

While challenging, the Covid-19 crisis has brought the significance of leisure services and spaces into sharp focus. New analysis by DCN forecasts a £325 million loss during 2020/21 for centres run by districts alone. However, the response to Covid-19 has also presented districts with a once in a lifetime opportunity to reach out to at risk and vulnerable people as councils have tracked and engaged with these groups in a way not previously seen. Districts can seize this opportunity to tailor local approaches, taking an offer right to the heart of our communities, and reaching those most inactive and suffering from poor mental health.

Strategic Rescue Package Needed

The Government was right to introduce the National Leisure Recovery Fund and the funding is welcome, together with the compensation scheme for lost income from sales fees and charges, the DCN estimates government will provide £116 million of support. However, to set up leisure services for the long-term, the Government must introduce a further rescue package which is broader than the Recovery Fund, less cumbersome, more urgent and with a strategic focus on how to remodel the future of the leisure sector towards beating obesity and improving mental health. This will protect leisure services that are critical to the health and happiness of the country now and after the pandemic.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT DCN@LOCAL.GOV.UK