

Beyond the Leisure Centre: How to make the case for active wellbeing investment

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William Eichler, editor of *LocalGov*, introduces this special report making the case for repositioning leisure provision as prevention infrastructure – and exploring how councils can unlock its full value for healthier, more connected and more resilient communities.



How to make the case for active wellbeing investment

The relationship between local government and leisure provision is at a turning point. For too long, swimming pools, sports halls and leisure centres have occupied an ambiguous position in council budgets – valued by communities, but difficult to defend against the relentless pressure of rising demand for statutory services. In a funding environment

that shows no signs of easing, that ambiguity is no longer sustainable.

The question councils must now answer is not whether leisure can justify its place on the balance sheet, but how to reposition it so that its full value is properly understood and acted upon.

This special report makes the case that the answer lies in a fundamental shift of perspective: from leisure as a discretionary service to leisure as prevention infrastructure. It is a shift that is already under way in some of the most forward-thinking authorities in England and Wales, and the evidence from those places is compelling.

The scale of the challenge facing local government is well documented. The Marmot reviews of 2010 and 2020 identified a persistent and widening health inequality gap. More recently, Office for National Statistics data for 2022–24 showed healthy life expectancy at its lowest since 2013, with residents in the most deprived communities spending over a decade longer in poor health than their more affluent neighbours. These are not abstract statistics. They translate directly into pressure on GPs and hospitals, into demand for adult social care, into economic inactivity and into the erosion of community resilience that councils are simultaneously being asked to address with diminishing resources.

Leisure, when designed well and positioned strategically, sits at the intersection of almost all of these pressures. It supports active ageing and delays the need for more intensive care. It reduces social isolation. It provides accessible, trusted spaces where health services and community support can be delivered alongside physical activity. It contributes to place-based regeneration and local economic vitality. And it does all of this at a scale and visibility that few other assets in the public sector can match.

The contributors to this report bring a range of perspectives to bear on how that potential can be realised. Sarah Watts, CEO of Alliance Leisure, sets out the strategic case for re-imagining leisure as part of a wider active wellbeing system – one that starts with people and outcomes rather than

facilities and timetables. Julie Russell, Convenor of the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network and Immediate Past Chair of the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association, argues that the moment is right for leisure to be repositioned as essential prevention infrastructure, with sustained investment mechanisms to match.

The report also draws on concrete examples of what this looks like in practice. Warsop Health Hub in Nottinghamshire demonstrates how an integrated, community-designed facility can exceed every commercial and social target set for it, while generating nearly £488,000 in social value in its first year alone. In Denbighshire, Jamie Groves of Denbighshire Leisure Ltd describes how a not-for-profit model is channelling commercial success into coastal regeneration and community resilience across North Wales. Alliance Leisure's analysis of active environments explores the design principles that make the difference between a building people visit and a place they return to.

Underpinning all of this is a practical examination of how leisure investment can be funded in a constrained environment – not by competing with statutory services, but by making a more sophisticated case for prevention that draws on developer contributions, place-based Government programmes and long-term system value.

The ambition of this report is simple: to give local government leaders, finance officers and leisure professionals the evidence, arguments and examples they need to make that case with confidence. The potential of leisure to support healthier, more connected and more resilient communities is already being demonstrated. The task now is to ensure it becomes the norm rather than the exception.



Transforming community health and wellbeing through sustainable leisure development

LocalGov editor William Eichler speaks to Sarah Watts, CEO of Alliance Leisure, who makes the case for a fundamental rethink of public leisure provision – arguing that councils can no longer afford to treat it as a discretionary service when it has the potential to drive prevention, reduce health inequalities and strengthen community resilience.

How should local authorities be rethinking their approach to leisure provision in the current climate?

Local authorities are under unprecedented pressure, managing rising health inequalities, ageing assets, tight finances and ambitious carbon targets. In that context, I do not believe we will continue to achieve the outcomes our communities need by simply refurbishing traditional leisure centres. Instead, leisure needs to be understood as a strategic part of place-based prevention, community wellbeing and long-term resilience.

Across the country, we are seeing a shift away from facility

led provision towards an Active Wellbeing model, where leisure is designed as part of a wider system that supports physical health, mental wellbeing and social connection. When this approach is embedded properly, it can transform not just buildings, but the role they play in people's everyday lives.

Why should leisure be seen as a strategic priority rather than a discretionary service?

Leisure is one of the few universal assets local authorities have that can support multiple priorities at once, from prevention and public health to tackling inequalities, supporting children and young people, enabling active ageing and strengthening community cohesion.

When facilities are relevant, welcoming and accessible, they become part of the solution. When they are outdated or disconnected from local needs, they quickly become a financial and operational burden.

At Clay Cross Active in North East Derbyshire, for example, the council replaced a tired leisure centre with a modern health and wellbeing hub designed around how people actually want to be active today. The result has been broader community engagement, stronger preventative health outcomes and a facility that plays a central role in local regeneration. It is a clear example of how leisure investment can deliver value far beyond traditional participation measures.

The real question for councils is not whether they can afford to invest in leisure, but whether they can afford not to.

How does integrating leisure with health and community services work in practice?

Co-location is often discussed in public sector reform, but it only works when it is more than different services sharing a building. Successful integration starts with shared objectives and designs spaces, services and pathways around common outcomes.

At Brandon Leisure and Health Hub, delivered with West Suffolk Council and Abbeycroft Leisure, traditional leisure provision sits alongside NHS clinic rooms, assisted exercise spaces and wellbeing support. This enables residents to access physical activity, health services and community support in one

familiar and non-clinical environment, reducing barriers and encouraging earlier engagement.

Projects like this work best when partners are involved early, priorities are aligned and there is flexibility to adapt designs and delivery models. Done well, co-location turns leisure facilities into trusted assets within the local prevention system.

Alliance Leisure talks about an 'Active Wellbeing' approach. How does this differ from traditional leisure development?

Traditional leisure development often starts with a checklist of facilities, such as a pool, gym or sports hall, and then asks how to fill them. An Active Wellbeing approach starts with people and outcomes, then designs environments and services to support them.

This means focusing on those who are least active or face the greatest barriers to participation, not just those who are already engaged. It also recognises that buildings alone are not the answer. Insight, community consultation, partnerships and long-term operational planning are just as important.

At Knaresborough Leisure and Wellness Centre, the emphasis was on creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that supports everyday wellbeing. Fitness, swimming and flexible community space are brought together to encourage prevention, social connection and sustained use.

This is why I often say we are no longer building traditional leisure centres. Increasingly, we are developing health and wellbeing hubs that can evolve alongside the communities they serve.

How can modern leisure facilities contribute to environmental sustainability and long-term financial resilience?

Environmental sustainability and financial resilience are now inseparable. Energy costs, carbon reduction targets and maintenance pressures all directly affect the long-term viability of public leisure facilities.

Modern leisure development must focus on whole life value, not just capital cost. That means making informed decisions early, around scope, specification and energy strategy, to avoid false economies that store up problems for the future.

At Cath Thom Leisure Centre in Hyndburn, sustainability was



embedded from the outset through energy efficient systems and a design approach that reduces long term operating costs. Combined with a flexible facility mix, this has helped create a centre that is both environmentally responsible and financially resilient.

What does success look like for local authorities adopting this integrated, sustainable approach to leisure?

For councils adopting an integrated and sustainable approach to leisure, success is not just about visitor numbers. It is about impact.

Success means active environments that engage a broader cross section of the community, strong partnerships with health and community organisations, and buildings that are affordable to operate and adaptable over time.

Ultimately, the most successful authorities are those that treat leisure not as a standalone service, but as a core part of their strategy for healthier and more resilient communities, now and for the future.



Active Wellbeing Hubs: From discretionary service to prevention infrastructure

Julie Russell, Convenor of the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network and Immediate Past Chair of the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), argues that modern leisure facilities must be reimagined as essential prevention infrastructure — and that investing in them is ultimately an investment in the social and economic fabric of communities.

The role of modern 'leisure' facilities (or active wellbeing hubs) must be re-imagined as a fundamental driver of health, social value and local economic growth, moving far beyond outdated perceptions of discretionary services.

As we look toward a landscape shaped by the 2025 Devolution Bill and neighbour hood health reforms, we must recognise that healthy, active citizens are the engine of a thriving economy.

The two Marmot reviews issued in 2010 and 2020 showed a persistent health inequality gap. Further, the Office for National of Statistics showed that for 2022-2024, healthy life expectancy had dropped by seven months, it's lowest since 2013. Indeed, across the UK, residents in our most deprived communities spend over a decade longer in poor health than their more affluent neighbours. This represents a deteriorating position for health, and a profound social injustice, fueling economic inactivity, straining families and

communities, and driving pressure on public resources, which remain overly focused on reactive care rather than prevention.

It is vital that places are designed to support active living for all communities, from housing, safe play and green spaces to walking, scooting and cycling infrastructure. Many civic spaces can act as powerful enablers of connection, citizenship and healthier communities.

Within this system, leisure facilities, now increasingly described as 'Active Wellbeing Hubs', play a unifying role. However, their position within the public offer requires a clear focus on purpose: tackling inequalities. This demands a reset in how they are designed, staffed, programmed, and how charges are applied, reflecting Marmot's principle of proportionate universalism.

By positioning Active Wellbeing Hubs as essential prevention infrastructure, we can help address these disparities. The greatest health and economic returns come from supporting people to move from inactivity to even low activity, particularly in mission-critical neighbour hoods.

'Integrating leisure into local health, economic and social strategy is a long-term commitment to prosperous, inclusive places.'

This shift is already emerging in some places and can also strengthen economic inclusion, supporting regeneration and creating workforce pathways, including new careers in community-focused preventative health. It also changes the nature of the workforce, extending its reach beyond the hub to engage communities and support prevention and care in trusted settings.

In turn, this underpins a new social contract that treats active wellbeing as a necessity rather than a luxury, establishing career pathways within a growing prevention economy.

Modern Active Wellbeing Hubs create social value as the physical expression of this contract, providing safe environments where community resilience can be strengthened. To maximise impact, we must move from service delivery to a more holistic approach that listens to and works with communities to enable healthier lives.

For this model to succeed, leisure and activity systems need to be fully integrated into wider health and community networks, rewired for prevention through shared purpose and collaboration.



Design must be rooted in local need and lived experience, ensuring social value is real rather than abstract. We must also look beyond traditional metrics like footfall and instead measure success through health outcomes, wellbeing, and reduced inequalities, using both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Delivering this vision requires leadership that connects strategic devolution priorities with everyday community realities across parks, halls and hubs. I have advocated for mechanisms such as a dedicated prevention precept to secure sustained investment, shifting from maintaining the world as it is, to actively practising the world we want to see.

When we invest in Active Wellbeing Hubs, refurbished or new, we are not simply maintaining buildings. We are investing in the social and economic fabric of our communities, creating a legacy of fewer preventable deaths, more lives lived with purpose, and new roles in preventative, community-based health rooted locally but connected to wider systems.

Ultimately, integrating leisure (or active wellbeing) into local health, economic and social strategy is a long-term commitment to prosperous, inclusive places where public facilities remain vital pillars of community life for generations to come.

Case Study: Delivering integrated community health at Warsop Health Hub



A community-focused health hub in Warsop is demonstrating how integrated, sustainable and financially resilient facilities can tackle health inequalities while boosting local engagement and wellbeing. *LocalGov* reports

Warsop Health Hub is redefining how local authorities can deliver integrated community health through accessible, sustainable and financially resilient facilities. Delivered by Alliance Leisure on behalf of Mansfield District Council, the £9.1m scheme responds directly to entrenched health inequalities in this former mining community in north Nottinghamshire.

With a population of around 12,000, Warsop faces significant challenges, including 25% of people with a limiting long-term illness, seven years lower-than-average life expectancy for

males and limited access to health and activity provision. The closure of Meden Sports Centre in 2018 left a critical gap, exacerbating inactivity, social isolation and poor mental wellbeing.

Extensive consultation revealed demand for more than a traditional leisure centre – residents desired an affordable, welcoming space that combined physical activity, health services and opportunities to connect. This process was supported by Serco, Warsop Parish Council, Active Notts and Vibrant Warsop, a local community organisation which helped engage residents through informal conversations, ensuring voices that might otherwise have been missed were heard. This grassroots engagement helped build trust in the project and ensured the final design reflected local needs.

The resulting vision aligned closely with the council's strategic objectives around prevention, health improvement and place-based regeneration. Rather than replicating a conventional leisure model, the project embraced Sport England's Leisure Local concept, delivering smaller, flexible, community-focused facilities.

The completed hub brings together a 15m swimming pool, gym, sports hall, community rooms, café and IT suite within a single-storey, fully accessible building. Crucially, it also provides space for social prescribing, wellbeing programmes and community-led activity, embedding health services directly within the community. This integrated approach supports early intervention and reduces pressure on wider public services.

'Co-created with the local community, the Health Hub offers a wide range of ways to get active while also fostering connection and social wellbeing. Importantly, it has been designed with environmental sustainability in mind, setting a new standard for local leisure facilities and showing how sport and activity can



be embedded at the heart of communities,' says Kevin Mills, Director of Place Development at Sport England.

From a delivery perspective, the project demonstrates how local authorities can manage risk while maintaining pace and cost certainty. Procured through the UK Leisure Framework, which is owned by Denbighshire Leisure Ltd, the scheme moved rapidly from design to completion, with construction delivered in under 12 months (two and a half months ahead of schedule) and within budget. Early contractor involvement and a collaborative, multi-disciplinary team ensured the project remained aligned with both funding requirements and community expectations.

Commercial performance has been equally strong, supporting

the council's objective to reduce subsidy. Designed to be operationally self-sustaining, the facility has exceeded all initial projections. Within the first two months, membership sales were nearly four times higher than forecast and around 15% of the local population are now members. This high level of engagement underpins a robust revenue model, helping to minimise ongoing financial pressure on the council.

Sustainability and low-carbon design were integral to the project from the outset, supporting both local and national net zero ambitions. The all-electric building incorporates air source heat pumps, solar photovoltaic panels, high-performance insulation and heat recovery systems to reduce energy demand. Low-flow water fittings, LED lighting and electric vehicle charging points further enhance environmental performance, while a sustainable drainage system manages rainwater on site.

Beyond environmental performance, the hub is delivering measurable social and economic value. In 2025 alone, it generated nearly £488,000 in social value, equivalent to £260 per person, exceeding the national average. The facility has also created local employment, with 75% of staff drawn from Warsop itself.

Partnership working has been central to maximising impact. A collaborative operating model brings together the council, operator and local organisations, enabling community-led programming and outreach. This approach has strengthened engagement with inactive and under served groups, while initiatives such as school swimming and walking programmes are already delivering tangible health outcomes. Notably, Year 6 swimming participation has doubled since opening.

Warsop Health Hub demonstrates how a strategically aligned, partnership-led approach can deliver far more than a leisure facility. By integrating health, wellbeing and community services within a sustainable and commercially viable model, it provides a blueprint for local authorities seeking to reduce inequality, improve population health and create long-term value for their communities.



Paying for Prevention: Reframing leisure investment in a constrained funding environment

James Foley, Commercial Director at Alliance Leisure, argues that in a constrained funding environment, the question councils should be asking is not whether they can afford to invest in leisure – but what that investment could prevent.

Local authorities are taking funding decisions under intense and persistent pressure. Rising demand for adult social care, increasing complexity within local health systems and limited room for manoeuvre in capital programmes mean that investment is increasingly judged on longterm value rather than short term affordability. In that context, the way leisure is funded and prioritised is beginning to change.

Rather than competing with statutory services for diminishing resources, leisure is increasingly being considered through a different lens: as infrastructure that can support prevention, place based regeneration and system resilience over time.

Prevention needs delivery, not just rhetoric

The direction of public service reform is well established. National policy and funding signals consistently point towards early intervention, community based support and reducing avoidable demand on acute services. The difficulty for councils has been translating these ambitions into investable projects that align with available funding mechanisms.

Making sense of a fragmented funding landscape

Most authorities operate within a complex funding environment made up of local contributions, developer funding, time limited Government programmes and partner investment. Too often, these streams are considered in isolation, with leisure projects struggling to secure a foothold unless they sit squarely within the capital programme.

In practice, however, there are multiple routes through which leisure and wellbeing schemes can be supported. Developer contributions intended to fund growth related infrastructure, for example, can legitimately be used for community buildings, health and wellbeing hubs, outdoor recreation and the upgrading of existing leisure assets. In many areas, significant balances have accumulated over time, some appropriately earmarked for future infrastructure, others unallocated and awaiting prioritised projects.

Used selectively, this type of funding can help unlock progress, either by contributing directly to delivery or by acting as match funding that strengthens bids to national programmes and external partners. For finance officers and members, it also provides a clear and defensible link between development, infrastructure and tangible community benefit.

'Decision makers are moving beyond questions of immediate cost and asking whether investment can reduce future pressure elsewhere in the system.'

Leisure sits at the intersection of health, place and community life. When designed and positioned well, it offers a rare combination of visibility, accessibility and scale. That makes it particularly suited to funding approaches that prioritise prevention, even where the money itself does not sit within traditional leisure budgets.

Alongside this, Government investment is increasingly focused on the quality of everyday places. Initiatives such as Pride in Place are explicitly concerned with restoring civic confidence and improving local environments, where leisure facilities often act as anchors for town centres and neighbour hoods. Similarly, the Government's £400m commitment to grassroots sport reflects growing recognition of the role that accessible local facilities play in participation, health and social connection.

From 'can we afford it?' to 'what does it prevent?'

What unites these funding opportunities is a shift in how value is assessed. Decision makers are moving beyond questions of immediate cost and asking whether investment can reduce future pressure elsewhere in the system.

For leisure, this represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Business cases based solely on income generation or subsidy reduction are rarely sufficient. Instead, successful projects are those that clearly articulate how leisure investment contributes to outcomes such as reduced inactivity, improved mental wellbeing, active ageing and stronger community connection.

This does not require overstating leisure's role. Rather, it demands clarity about contribution, supported by evidence and realistic assumptions about longterm impact.

Designing for financial resilience

Funding scrutiny does not end at approval. Rising energy costs and operational pressures mean that longterm affordability is now a central concern for funders, members and finance officers alike. Projects that demonstrate lower lifecycle costs, flexibility of use and the ability to adapt as community needs change are increasingly favoured.

This places greater emphasis on design decisions, operating models and partnership working from the outset. Leisure developments that are resilient by design are more likely to retain political and financial support over time.

A more strategic funding conversation

The most forward looking authorities are moving beyond asking how to fund a leisure centre and instead ask how leisure can help them use scarce resources more effectively. In that context, local funding mechanisms, place based Government programmes and national investment in grassroots activity become complementary tools rather than competing options.

Leisure investment will not resolve the structural challenges facing local government finance. But when aligned with prevention and backed by a credible funding strategy, it offers a practical way to invest limited resources in outcomes that matter both now and in the future.

Case Study: Denbighshire Leisure: Reinvestment, regeneration and coastal community impact



Jamie Groves, Managing Director, Denbighshire Leisure Ltd (DLL), explores how Denbighshire Leisure Ltd is leveraging the UK Leisure Framework to reinvest in local services, drive coastal regeneration and deliver measurable social and economic impact across North Wales communities.

At Denbighshire Leisure Ltd (DLL), our role goes far beyond operating facilities. As a not for profit leisure company, we exist to reinvest, regenerate and support the social and economic wellbeing of our communities. Nowhere is this more evident than in how we use the UK Leisure Framework to drive financial resilience, coastal regeneration and measurable local impact across Denbighshire.

The UK Leisure Framework is a central pillar of our approach. Owned and managed by DLL and delivered by Alliance Leisure as development partner, the framework provides a compliant and specialist route for leisure development that is designed around outcomes, not transactions. It enables local authorities and trusts to move at pace while maintaining transparency, accountability and longterm value for money. For us, it has also created a sustainable commercial model that generates surplus which is directly reinvested back into local services and neighbourhoods.



This alignment between national delivery and local benefit is critical. Framework income is not extracted from the system but retained within it, allowing us to continually improve facilities that matter most to residents and visitors. In Denbighshire, this has translated into targeted reinvestment at centres such as Rhyl and Prestatyn, ensuring our coastal communities benefit tangibly from national success.

Coastal regeneration is a key priority for the county, and leisure plays a vital enabling role within the wider tourism economy. Our investments at Prestatyn and Rhyl Leisure Centres, as well as our attractions, were carefully designed to enhance everyday local provision while also improving the destination offer for visitors. At

Prestatyn, digital fitness and immersive activity spaces have been introduced to engage younger users, support schools and create a vibrant community hub. At Rhyl, underused areas have been transformed into high value fitness and group exercise spaces, increasing participation and improving the overall customer experience.

Beyond the core leisure footprint, UK Leisure Framework reinvestment has supported food and beverage developments that contribute directly to the regeneration of the North Wales coast. Projects such as the expansion of the outdoor area at the Beach Hut in Prestatyn and the introduction of the 1891 outdoor terrace have increased dwell time, strengthened the visitor experience and supported year round economic activity. These are modest but meaningful interventions that demonstrate how leisure can support place making and destination growth.

Strong governance underpins this model. The UK Leisure Framework is overseen by a joint management board, bringing together DLL officers and Alliance Leisure colleagues. This structure balances public sector accountability with private sector delivery expertise, ensuring decisions are robust, transparent and focused on longterm outcomes. Crucially, it also enables rapid and collaborative responses when challenges arise, protecting projects, clients and communities alike.

Our operating model enables us to deliver measurable participation and engagement outcomes. Framework projects begin with needs analysis and stakeholder engagement, ensuring facilities respond to local priorities around health, inclusion and wellbeing. This focus has supported increased participation across all age groups, improved accessibility and enhanced user experience. Social value is not treated as an add-on but is built into delivery, measured and reported alongside financial performance.

What the UK Leisure Framework has demonstrated is that all sorts of leisure operating models can be both financially resilient and socially impactful. By owning our framework, partnering with Alliance Leisure as delivery partner and reinvesting surplus locally, we have created a virtuous circle where national delivery strengthens local outcomes. For our coastal communities in particular, this has meant better facilities, stronger community hubs and leisure assets that actively support regeneration and economic vitality.

This approach reflects our core belief that leisure, when well-planned and well governed, is a catalyst for healthier people, stronger places and more resilient communities.



Unlocking the potential of active environments

John Leaver, Marketing & Frameworks Director at Alliance Leisure, makes the case for designing leisure facilities as everyday civic spaces – places where people don't just exercise, but gather, belong and stay connected to their communities.

Leisure has always been about more than activity. Long before the language of wellbeing entered public policy, civic spaces gave people places to gather, to move, to watch, to participate and to belong. As local authorities rethink how they invest in their communities, there is an opportunity to rediscover broader purpose and design environments that quietly support healthier, more connected lives.

At Alliance Leisure, we increasingly see the value of leisure not only in what happens inside a building, but in how that building fits into everyday life. Active environments succeed when they feel familiar, welcoming and useful beyond a single purpose. They are places people return to regularly, not because they have to, but because they want to.

From facilities to everyday places

Traditional leisure thinking has often started with facilities.

Pools, gyms and sports halls designed around timetables and programmes. Active environments start somewhere else entirely, with daily routines and human behaviour.

People are more likely to stay active when movement is woven into ordinary life. When a leisure building sits on the high street, next to shops, libraries or learning spaces, it becomes part of a normal day rather than a special trip. At Station Leisure and Learning Centre in Mablethorpe, activity, learning and social space are deliberately combined, encouraging people to linger, meet others and build regular habits around movement and connection.

These patterns matter. Over time, small, consistent behaviours help people stay mobile, independent and socially engaged, reducing the likelihood that issues escalate into crisis.

Supporting healthy ageing through design

An ageing population does not need more specialist spaces. It needs environments that are intuitive, dignified and adaptable. Design choices such as visibility between spaces, comfortable seating, cafés and natural light all influence whether people feel confident to use a building as they age.

'There is an opportunity to rediscover broader purpose and design environments that quietly support healthier, more connected lives.'

When leisure environments are designed with these principles in mind, they become places where older residents feel welcome without being singled out. Informal interaction, gentle activity and shared space support both physical capability and mental wellbeing. These factors are closely linked to delaying the need for more intensive support later in life.

Culture, identity and wellbeing

Wellbeing is shaped as much by identity and purpose as by physical health. Culture, arts and heritage give people reasons to feel proud of where they live and connected to their community.



Increasingly, leisure buildings are being designed to accommodate exhibitions, performances, community events and creative activity alongside sport and fitness. This blend creates richer civic spaces that appeal to a broader cross section of the community. When people see their stories and interests reflected in shared places, those places become meaningful rather than transactional.

Civic spaces as anchors for belonging

Loneliness and isolation are not solved through services alone. They are addressed through everyday encounters, familiarity and trust. Civic leisure spaces can play a powerful role here by offering safe, neutral environments where people can spend time without pressure or expectation.

Across Alliance Leisure projects, cafés, atriums and flexible community rooms are increasingly treated as core elements rather than secondary additions. These spaces enable

conversation, volunteering, informal support and intergenerational contact. Over time, they help build civic pride and a sense of belonging that strengthens communities from the inside out.

Investing for long term resilience

When leisure investment is approached in this way, its impact extends far beyond participation statistics. Active environments help people stay connected, confident and independent, easing long term pressure on adult social care and public health services.

The most successful projects are those that recognise leisure as part of the social fabric of a place. Not just somewhere to exercise, but somewhere to dwell, to meet and to belong.

Unlocking the potential of active environments requires a shift in perspective. From buildings to places. From services to experiences. From short term outputs to long term resilience. That is where leisure investment delivers its greatest value.

Conclusion:

The case for leisure as prevention infrastructure does not rest on aspiration alone.

The case for leisure as prevention infrastructure does not rest on aspiration alone. The projects and perspectives gathered in this report demonstrate that when leisure is planned strategically, designed around community need and integrated into wider health and wellbeing systems, it delivers outcomes that matter – for residents, for councils and for the public finances.

What unites the examples here – from Warsop to Denbighshire, from Clay Cross to Brandon – is not a single model or formula, but a shared set of principles. Investment decisions that start with people rather than facilities. Designs that reflect lived experience and local need. Operating models that are financially resilient and environmentally sustainable. Partnerships that extend the reach of leisure into communities and services that traditional provision has never reached.

The shift in language from 'leisure centres' to 'active wellbeing hubs' is more than cosmetic. It reflects a genuine change in how the best authorities understand the purpose of public leisure provision. These are not places where people go to exercise. They are places where communities are strengthened, where



health inequalities are actively addressed, where the case for prevention is made tangible every day.

That shift in thinking also demands a shift in how success is measured. Footfall and membership numbers will always matter, but they are insufficient measures of what integrated leisure provision can achieve. Councils leading the way in this space are tracking health outcomes, reductions in social isolation, social value generation and the long-term impact on demand for more costly services. These are the metrics that make the argument to finance directors and elected members – and they are the metrics that will secure investment for the next generation of facilities.

None of this is straightforward. Local authorities face real constraints, and the funding landscape remains complex and fragmented. But the evidence in this report shows that complexity can be navigated. Procurement frameworks, developer contributions, national place-based programmes and partnership models all offer viable routes to investment that would once have seemed out of reach.

The opportunity in front of local government is significant. As neighbour hood health reform gathers pace, as devolution reshapes the relationship between tiers of government, and as the consequences of a decade of inactivity and rising inequality become ever more visible, leisure has a stronger case to make than at any point in a generation.

The facilities that will make the greatest difference are those built on a clear understanding of that case – and the ambition to act on it.



AllianceLeisure

Alliance Leisure continues to work with councils and communities to develop and deliver active wellbeing infrastructure that responds to local need. More information, insight and case studies are available on the Alliance Leisure website.



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