

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP,
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,
DCMS,
100 Parliament St,
Westminster,
London, SW1A 2BQ.

10 July 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Future survival of leisure services - update

Further to my letter dated 17 April 2020 regarding the future survival of leisure services, I am writing to you again on behalf of our member councils to seek a meeting with you to discuss how we can work together to put urgent measures in place to support our national leisure and sporting infrastructure. Even with permission to open now, many will not be able to reopen before September, and for some it will be even longer or not at all.

The announcement of £1.57 billion to help protect the futures of UK theatres, galleries, museums and other cultural venues has been very welcome. It is great that the Government has recognised the importance of culture to the social fabric of our nation by announcing this funding which will be a lifeline to many theatres, galleries and museums which have been severely impacted by coronavirus. We are looking forward to seeing the detail of the funding package and hope it will be accompanied by a detailed timeline for the reopening of theatres and other live venues, ensuring these important institutions can play their part in the nation's recovery. However, there still remain gaps in support for other DCMS sectors, including the leisure sector.

In the last few weeks we have seen Vivacity Leisure hand back its contract to Peterborough Council and are concerned others are on the brink of a similar decision. Our leisure partners report that they do not expect a return to viability for at least 6-12 months and the continued support of the Government's furlough scheme which has been their lifeline is needed to see them through this critical period. If action is not taken now, we risk losing our national leisure and sporting infrastructure – this will have a huge impact on the nation's physical and mental wellbeing and will cost millions to rebuild or restore these facilities in the future.

The leisure centres and other sporting facilities provided by councils support 36 per cent of physical activity across the country. Whilst facilities provided by the private sector contribute greatly, it is councils that provide the swimming pools and other facilities that would generally be less profitable for and less attractive to the private sector. This gives them a particularly high reach into deprived and BAME communities, making this an equalities issue as well as a national health challenge.

As leaders, investors, commissioners and contractors of place, councils are in a unique position to deliver on the Government's recent announcements to increase active travel, to help rebuild the economy and to deliver its manifesto pledge to address the underlying health causes which increases NHS demand.

Councils already have a wealth of experience in driving the improvement of health outcomes through their statutory public health function and have established health and wellbeing programmes in place which are empowering communities affected by lifestyle-related conditions such as obesity to live healthier lives. Council run leisure facilities play a key role in keeping the nation active and reducing the burden on the NHS. For example, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

is successfully reducing the number of bariatric operations required locally by as much as 80 per cent through its Live Well programme, which supports GPs to refer overweight patients to their local leisure centre to access support to achieve a healthier weight without the need for costly bariatric surgery – nationally the NHS spends £36.6 million per year on this alone so the potential savings to the NHS and to social care is huge.

However, schemes like these are dependent on having the leisure and sporting infrastructure available locally. Many of these facilities are under immediate threat of closure due to the impact the pandemic is having on their ability to generate income while facing ongoing high standing costs. This is having a wider impact for example on the RNLI who are struggling to train lifeguards without access to council run facilities.

Councils are doing their best to help their leisure partners through a range of emergency measures. The LGA has commissioned Local Partnerships to work with several providers and their council clients to help them reach an agreement. However, for the most part, these are not long-term solutions and do not guarantee their future existence. The LGA has also:

- Written an [advice note](#) to help councils support leisure providers through COVID-19
- Produced a think piece with Local Government Physical Activity partners on "[Why an active community needs to be at the heart of renewal](#)"
- Delivered leadership training for officers to support them to advocate, innovate and embed these vital services across other council led functions such as travel, housing, planning
- Planning leadership training for elected members to support them in their role

Sport and leisure infrastructure is essential to keep our nation active and it is incredibly important for communities. When the time is right for grassroots and community sport to reopen, they will require facilities such as sports pitches and playing fields. A working physical activity offer for people is vital. In addition to the suggestions in my previous letter, I would like to discuss how together we can:

1. Work with MHCLG to identify emergency funding to stabilise the leisure sector and those councils who have underwritten their leisure providers as a result of Covid-19;
2. Increase the value of Sport England's facilities fund so that we can provide communities with modern facilities designed to get them most active, and at the same time 'green' the estate to help move the UK towards meeting its climate change commitments. Sport England's figures show that 60% of the public leisure estate is past its due date for major refurbishment or even the end of its lifespan, making refresh and renewal a vital component of public leisure going forward will help to create jobs and rebuild the economy. Councils can unlock additional local funding to match the national contribution and extend the reach of the fund.
3. Social prescribing through culture, sports and green space programmes will be essential to communities' recovery. It is important that the activities to which patients are being referred to are adequately funded as funding is not included within existing plans and capacity is limited.
4. Work together to support local health systems to integrate the offer sport, leisure, culture and parks services play in the nation's health.

I look forward to working with you on this. Thomas French (Thomas.French@local.gov.uk) would be happy to work with your officials to find a suitable date for a call to discuss further.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson,

Chair of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

CC:

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Nigel Huddleston MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage

Tim Hollingsworth, Chief Executive, Sport England