Leaders demand fair funding for local facilities

4 August 2025



Leaders from across local government and the fitness and leisure sector are urging the Government to ensure that the £400 million announced in the Spending Review for grassroots sports facilities is directed towards vital community assets such as leisure centres, swimming pools, and local gyms.

The coalition – made up of the Local Government Association, Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association, Community Leisure UK, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Swim England, and ukactive – is calling for the funding to be invested in the facilities that people rely on every day to stay active and healthy.

They argue that local authorities are best placed to identify where investment is most needed, and to ensure the funding delivers maximum impact for communities. With councils already the largest funders of public fitness and leisure services, directing investment through them would help safeguard and enhance the infrastructure that supports physical activity across the country.

This approach would also align with the Government's 10 Year Health Plan, enabling councils to work with health and care partners to promote active lifestyles and improve public health outcomes.

With leisure centres and swimming pools particularly popular amongst older age

groups and people with health conditions, supporting these facilities will help tackle existing health inequalities most effectively.

The call comes amid stark warnings about the state of the nation's leisure infrastructure:

• 30 per cent of children in Year 7 cannot swim 25 metres confidently – up from 27 per cent in 2017/18.

• Since 2010, 500 swimming pools have closed, representing a loss of over 34,000 square metres of water space. Nearly half of these closures occurred in the last five years.

• 63 per cent of main sports halls and 60 per cent of swimming pools are beyond their expected lifespans or in need of refurbishment.

• 24 per cent of council areas face the risk of reducing or closing leisure services due to rising energy and operational costs.

• If current trends continue, physical inactivity could rise by 35 per cent by 2030, placing further strain on the NHS and public finances.

• Public demand for health and fitness facilities is growing, with a record 11.5 million people now a member of a health and fitness club in the UK, but growth is hampered by economic conditions.

Cllr Liz Green, Chair of the Local Government Association's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said:

"Local communities rely on sport and leisure facilities every day, whether it is swimming for the family or going to the gym. The benefits to both physical and mental health can be life-changing. Yet without urgent investment we risk losing these altogether.

"It is positive the Government has announced £400 million for grass roots sports facilities. But for this funding to be truly transformative, we are calling for this to be invested via councils, so it can have the impact that delivers the ambition the Government has to improve our nation's health."

Huw Edwards, CEO of ukactive, said:

“It is vital that the Government does not repeat the same mistakes of the past by continuing to focus investment in facilities that have not delivered a happier, healthier nation, and instead invests in facilities that match the needs and demands of communities. Investing strategically in gyms, pools and leisure centres will demonstrate the Government’s commitment to the major drivers of physical activity and help address the market failure of public sector facilities so they can fulfil their essential role.”

Donna Pentelow, Chair of CLOA, said:

“Council leisure centres, swimming pools and outdoor spaces are on the frontline of local health and wellbeing. We see every day how vital these facilities and spaces are to support active wellbeing for residents of all ages. A place-based investment approach ensures funding reaches the communities that need it most. By directing grassroots sports funding through local government, we can support its appropriate use to truly tackle health inequalities and deliver on the Government’s long-term health ambitions.”

Andy Salmon, CEO of Swim England, said: “Swimming is particularly popular amongst older age groups, and those with a disability or long term health condition. If we want to tackle health inequalities and best support a healthier and happier nation then it’s vital we have a network of sustainable pools for people to access. That’s why we need to see this investment targeted at the pools and leisure centres the nation needs.”

Kirsty Cumming, CEO of Community Leisure UK, said:

“Public leisure is at the heart of communities across the country, offering opportunities for communities to be physically, mentally and socially active. We urge the Government to invest in public leisure facilities, from single site community run pools to large leisure venues, supporting them to be sustainable and enabling people to live healthier and happier lives.”

Image Photo by Kindel Media