Community leisure’s £400M path to sustainability

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The UK Government’s commitment of £400 million in the Spending Review represents a pivotal investment in grassroots sports and leisure facilities. As local government and fitness sector leaders—including Swim England, the Local Government Association, and ukactive—highlight, this funding must be strategically used to modernize community leisure assets. With a significant portion of the UK’s leisure infrastructure outdated and energy costs rising, targeted investment in energy efficiency can revitalize these essential spaces.

Currently, 63% of sports halls and 60% of pools are operating beyond their intended lifespans. Moreover, 24% of council areas face the threat of leisure service closures due to unaffordable energy bills. Modernizing through energy-efficient lighting, renewable heating, and solar installations offers a way to secure the future of these services while promoting public health and sustainability.

Why Energy Efficiency Is Urgent

Leisure centres have become increasingly expensive to operate. Since 2010, over 500 swimming pools have closed, with many others struggling to keep up with energy demands. Without action, physical inactivity could rise by 35% by 2030, further straining the NHS and worsening health inequalities.

The £400 million investment presents a rare opportunity. Smart, energy-efficient

upgrades will reduce costs, extend facility life spans, and support the Government's 10-Year Health Plan aimed at encouraging active lifestyles.

1. *LED Lighting: Lower Bills, Brighter Spaces*

Lighting accounts for a significant share of energy use in sports halls and indoor pools. Many facilities still rely on outdated systems that are inefficient and expensive.

Solution: Transition to LED lighting, which consumes up to 75% less energy and can last up to 50,000 hours. Smart lighting systems equipped with motion sensors and dimmers further enhance efficiency.

Impact: Annual savings can range from £10,000 to £20,000 per facility, freeing up resources for community programs such as youth swim lessons and senior wellness classes.

Inclusivity: Improved visibility makes facilities safer and more accessible, especially for older adults or those with visual impairments or mobility challenges.

Case Study: Manchester Leisure Centre

In 2023, a large leisure centre in Manchester replaced outdated lighting in its sports hall and pool area with LED systems. The upgrade resulted in a 60% reduction in lighting energy use and annual savings of £15,000. These savings were reinvested in free swim programs for local schools. As a result, the centre saw a 25% increase in participation from students who previously couldn't access lessons due to cost. Teachers also reported measurable improvements in water confidence and fitness among Year 7 pupils, directly addressing the national issue that 30% of children at this age cannot swim 25 metres confidently.

2. *Solar Power: Clean Energy, Cost Relief*

High energy consumption makes many leisure centres heavily reliant on grid electricity. Solar technology offers a way to cut this dependency.

Solution: Install rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) panels, supported by battery storage to retain excess power for high-demand periods. Solar thermal panels can also supplement pool heating.

Impact: A medium-sized centre with a 100kW PV system can cover up to 30% of its electricity needs, saving £10,000–£15,000 annually. Over 25–30 years, these savings significantly lower operating costs.

Community Benefits: Savings help maintain service levels and affordability. Solar-powered centres also serve as visible community leaders in sustainability.

Case Study: Devon Community Pool

In 2024, a community-run pool in Devon installed a 50kW solar PV system alongside a small battery bank. Within a year, the facility cut electricity costs by £8,000. Importantly, these savings enabled the continuation of subsidized swim sessions for seniors, people with disabilities, and local carers—groups who had previously seen reductions in access due to budget pressures. Attendance in these sessions rose by 40%, and user surveys showed increased satisfaction, particularly among elderly residents who felt more connected and active.

3. *Renewable Heating: Sustainable Warmth for All Seasons*

Heating remains one of the largest operational expenses, particularly for swimming pools, which need constant temperature regulation for water and air.

Solution: Install air-source or ground-source heat pumps. These systems draw natural heat from the air or ground, offering high efficiency and low emissions. Combined with modern insulation and heat recovery, they can revolutionize energy use.

Impact: Heat pumps are 3–4 times more efficient than traditional gas boilers. A large centre can cut heating bills by £20,000–£30,000 annually. Pools can reduce heating energy consumption by up to 40%.

Support: Installation costs can be offset through Government grants like the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

Case Study: Birmingham Fitness Hub

In 2024, a major fitness and aquatic centre in Birmingham transitioned from gas boilers to an air-source heat pump system. This switch cut heating costs by 35%, saving around £25,000 annually. The centre used the savings to extend opening hours, introduce free weekend fitness classes, and launch a new community

wellness initiative targeting low-income families. Within six months, class attendance tripled, and centre membership among people from deprived neighbourhoods grew by 18%. Facility managers also noted a drop in maintenance calls and an increase in air quality, improving user satisfaction.

Place-Based Strategy: Let Councils Lead

Local authorities are best equipped to determine where funding can deliver the greatest impact. A place-based approach ensures tailored, equitable distribution of the £400 million:

Urban Areas: Can retrofit large, high-use centres with LEDs and heat pumps to maximize energy savings.

Rural Areas: Benefit from solar PV systems to reduce grid reliance and operating costs.

Deprived Areas: Targeted investment makes centres more affordable and inclusive for those most affected by health inequalities.

Directing funds through local councils ensures that investments reflect community needs, enhance public health, and foster long-term sustainability.

The Broader Impact: Health, Equality, and Net-Zero Goals

Energy-efficient upgrades offer more than cost savings—they protect essential community assets. By lowering operational expenses, leisure centres can stay open, accessible, and affordable. These changes support the Government's net-zero agenda and position public facilities as leaders in the transition to sustainable living.

Cllr Liz Green of the Local Government Association warns, "Without urgent investment, we risk losing these facilities altogether." Huw Edwards of ukactive adds, "Investing strategically in gyms, pools, and leisure centres will demonstrate the Government's commitment to the major drivers of physical activity."

Call to Action: Share the Vision

The School Supply Store & Network urges communities, councils, and stakeholders to advocate for this funding to be used for energy-efficient

modernization. By upgrading lighting, adopting solar energy, and investing in renewable heating, leisure facilities can thrive sustainably, improve access, and promote healthier lifestyles.

Let’s ensure every community benefits from resilient, inclusive, and environmentally responsible leisure spaces.

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