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Austerity Cuts to Local Leisure Services is a False Economy

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Author



1. **Daniel Parnell**
Senior Lecturer in Sport Business Management, Leeds Beckett University

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Pulling the plug on services will be costly. AMA via Shutterstock

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Public sector workers have been [taking to the streets](#) protesting the below-inflation pay rises and austerity. The Trades Union Congress hoped this would send a clear message to the British government. But Downing Street is sticking with its line that pay restraint has and will safeguard jobs.

This kind of austerity policy making from the government has also helped deliver significant cuts to key services across local authorities, as a product of the comprehensive [spending review](#). Unsurprisingly, local authority sport and leisure services have not been safeguarded during this process.

A case example of this is Liverpool. On the one hand, Liverpool is the home to two top-flight football clubs and is a top producer of elite sporting talent, including hugely successful Olympian gymnast Beth Tweddle. On the other, the city is host to one the most deprived local authority areas for many years.

As a result of government cut backs in Liverpool, Park Road Sports Centre faces closure. This is a local authority service that supported Tweddle from the beginning of her career. It also provides opportunities for many local people to participate in a range of physical activities. A decision to close this key community facility, appears to contradict all [evidence that supports access to opportunities for physical activity](#), especially in deprived communities for the promotion of a healthier nation.

This one case is not isolated and is certainly no accident. The Association for Public Service Excellence, an association of local councils, [reported similar impacts](#) to recreation services across the country as a result of government-led cuts. Such vast changes to public sector provision hampers the public health agenda – especially the drive for lifelong participation across communities – at a time when the National Health Service is also [short of cash](#).

Private concerns

The story paints a gloomy picture for the health of the nation. But things could get worse. A number of private organisations are stepping forward to deliver our sport and leisure services, some of which are aligned to public health. It would be easy to make the comparison to the privatisation of the NHS.

Take Virgincare, a private company and the brainchild of multi-millionaire Richard Branson. It claims to run more than 230 “free” NHS and social sites “with a difference” across the country. The less cynical of us might believe this is a selfless vision of Branson’s.

But let’s not be fooled. The NHS is a gold mine for commercial businesses and Branson is no fool. As we cut provision for local authority sport and leisure services we may be contributing to Branson’s customers of the future. Not airline passengers, but the kind that are obese, have cardiovascular disease, diabetes and lifestyle-related cancers.

As local authorities’ sport and leisure departments look to commission “value-for-money” businesses to deliver their services, including [professional football clubs like Everton and Liverpool FC](#). We must consider the genuine motivations behind the businesses taking over these services.

While football clubs represent huge brands, sometimes with global appeal and therefore strength to carry important health messages, football is ultimately a business and is driven by the bottom line. This is the opposite philosophy to those found in local authorities.

The potential problem of these businesses taking over services is that they will then manage them in a way that is ruthlessly revenue-driven and ineffective in promoting healthy behaviour. Both of these problems have been observed in professional football clubs that are responsible for (and publicly funded to) deliver on social objectives in the local community.

Cutting back on the supply leisure activities in local communities and funding commercial businesses to deliver on social objectives could be one of the major false

economies of our time. Especially when the financial burden of inactivity and weight-related health problems continues to rise.