

Can council-funded sport survive austerity?

The sports sector is being asked to help resolve the obesity crisis, while at the same time facing austerity cuts. How can services be defended? We ask our experts

An investigation by the BBC last year revealed the sports and leisure budgets of English councils were reduced by £42m between 2010 and 2015 as part of government austerity cuts. In some areas, cuts have been so severe that funding has been axed almost entirely.

This trimming isn't tied to any particular geographic area. A report by *The Guardian* revealed that of the authorities most

severely affected, two are on opposite sides of the country. Rossendale in Lancashire experienced a 92.2 per cent cut to its sport and recreation budget, while the borough of Haringey in north London was forced to make savings of 98.2 per cent.

Despite this, local authorities remain – as a group – among the heaviest investors in sport. But for how long? According to the Local Government Authority, councils

could face a further £3.3bn overall funding reduction in the 2016-17 financial year and sport, which is not a statutory service, is expected to carry its fair share of these cuts.

Can publicly-funded sport and recreation survive this next round of austerity cuts? Are there any ways in which local authorities can ease the pressure on budgets? We asked a group of experts to give us their views on the best way forward for these vital services.

Mark Allman
Chair, Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA)

The challenge presented by huge reductions in funding from central government, coupled with the pressures of increasing demand in essential services has never been greater and there is no letup in sight.

The local authority sport and leisure sector has responded in a typically resilient manner, finding creative means of generating more income, while often seeking to reduce costs through more efficient operations or various forms of outsourcing or partnering.

Often we have seen savings of more than 40 per cent made, with strong outcomes still being delivered. However, there is a perfect storm approaching, with physical activity being increasingly recognised as an area that should feature much more strongly in central and local government policy. Yet at the same time, the cuts in budgets and the drain in experienced older staff from those local authorities is creating a potential vacuum of leadership when it's needed the most.

Sports grounds and swimming pools will always be a focus of local authorities, but



their continued funding remains in the balance. Future sustainability can be better secured by placing physical activity at the heart of policy and

reaping the cumulative rewards of addressing vital areas such as health inequality, workforce health, educational attainment, social inclusion and economic development.

But in order to do that, we need to be encouraging policy makers, commissioners and businesses to invest in the long-term. This means that all of us in the sports sector must work collaboratively to demonstrate that we are playing our part in delivering the key outcomes for people in our locality.

If we get this right, we'll ensure stability and growth for sport and recreation. Working in isolation will only lead to failure and the sad, slow demise of what is one of the best value investments around.



The sustainability of swimming pools can be better secured by a focus on activity



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Successful strategies for navigating austerity cuts include flexible pricing, partnership working and income diversification

Dr Dan Parnell
Senior lecturer, Manchester
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Local authority sport and leisure services continue to be at the sharp end of funding cuts and it has never been more important to consider how organisations navigate these constrained fiscal times.

Local government is in a phase transition and operating within a period of super-austerity. Recently we explored the management strategies of non-profit sport facilities in this era of austerity.

The headline findings highlighted two major challenges – reduced local authority services (ie, funding for maintenance, repairs or parks teams) and increased site operating costs. The management strategies adopted by facility managers to successfully



navigate austerity included flexible pricing strategies, strong partnership working and income diversification.

In summarising the protective management strategies utilised by organisations and facility managers to navigate austerity, three characteristics should be viewed as favourable. These are: diversifying income streams; a link-up with a larger, established community organisation to

share management functions and access to participants; and being well-networked, with links across other similar local and regional organisations and community stakeholders.

Ultimately, participation in sport is based on the user experience. The challenges associated with austerity cuts are reducing the quality of these experiences. To strategically move forward, more platforms are required to allow large-, medium- and small-sized organisations and facilities to network, share, inform and support and to assist in the development of collective strategic capabilities.

More platforms are required to enable organisations and facility managers to develop collective strategic capabilities

