

## ukactive Policy Calls

### Introduction

ukactive's Vision 2030 sets out our ambition to see more than five million new members of the sector's facilities by the end of the decade. As part of our 2024 General Election plans, this paper provides an overview of ukactive's five primary areas of policy focus for members to use in any correspondence with local Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs). It covers policy areas including tax and regulatory reform, public leisure investment, children and young people, and NHS collaboration, to unlock the potential of the sector to get more people, more active, more often. Working together, we want to support millions more people and make the UK the most active nation in Europe.

If you require any more information or have any additional questions, please contact [publicaffairs@ukactive.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@ukactive.org.uk)

### No growth without health

Ill health among the working-age population costs the Government £150bn a year, a rise of 60% over the past six years. More than 7.71 million people are currently awaiting treatment on the NHS and more than 35.2 million working days have been lost in 2022-23 due to self-reported work-related ill health or injury, underlining the urgency for solutions. More than 20 million people in the UK (about a third of the population), have musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions, leading to more than 30 million working days being lost every year and contributing to 30% of GP consultations in England. Approximately 1.35 million people are inactive in the labour market due to long-term sickness, with more than 70% reporting MSK conditions.

Physical activity, supported by gyms, pools and leisure centres, can not only ease pressure on the NHS through the maintenance of good health, but also support the rehabilitation of people, whether from MSK conditions, mental health issues, diabetes, dementia, or hip fractures – placing the sector as a principal partner of the NHS going forward. In March 2023, the Government pledged £400m to enhance mental health and MSK resources, aligning with the goals of our sector to grow these services within our facilities. Discussions with the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) are ongoing regarding the specifics of this funding.

### Five key areas and associated policies

#### 1. Drive the integration of the physical activity sector and the NHS

**Policy:** ukactive calls for Government commitment to developing and formalising the integration of the physical activity and leisure sector with the NHS and wider health and community services.



More people  
More active  
More often

## 2. Tackle economic inactivity

**Policy:** ukactive's pilot of MSK hubs has grown to 100 sites and has the potential to be scaled nationally, as does the Prehab4Cancer programme and our members' wider rehabilitation services for multiple conditions.

**Policy:** With the rise in home-working, ukactive calls for for the expansion of the Cycle to Work scheme to include gym memberships, fitness trackers and equipment to support the health and wellbeing of the working-age population. An independent cost-benefit analysis conducted in 2017 showed this would lead to a surge in activity participation and savings to the Treasury of £240m through reduced NHS costs, improved workplace productivity and reduced premature mortality.

**Policy:** ukactive calls for more exercise referral to be included within schemes designed to get people with long-term health conditions back into the workplace.

## 3. Grow the sector to help more people to maintain their health

ukactive's Energy Risk Survey in February 2024 found that 63% of private sector facilities are 'extremely likely' to have to increase customer pricing in the next six months to help cope with high operating costs, with 75% having already been forced to raise prices since October 2023. Existing tax and regulation structures hinder the growth of the sector, with operators surviving in spite of the landscape, rather than thriving because of it.

Equally, in January, ukactive's Consumer Engagement Survey found 24% of former gym members listed expense as the main reason they had cancelled their memberships, while 49% suggested it contributed to their decision to leave. 67% of prospective members listed the cost as a reason they would not join a gym.

Enabling the sector to grow through improved tax and regulation would in turn lead to increased accessibility and reduced pricing, helping to tackle health disparities and driving activity levels up.

**Policy:** ukactive calls for a wholesale review and reform of the business rates system for fitness and leisure operators to encourage the growth of physical activity facilities on the high street and promote greater participation.

**Policy:** ukactive calls for the next Government to permanently reduce the level of VAT charged on health and wellbeing businesses, such as gyms, pools and leisure centres, to incentivise physical activity and promote growth.

**Policy:** ukactive calls for a review of VAT rules to better support schools to open facilities to the community.

## 4. Invest in public leisure



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More active  
More often

Public sector leisure contributes more than £3.3bn in social value to UK society through its impact on wellbeing (£2.4bn) and health (£715m), and wider social issues like education and crime. It provides local, place-based assets and employs a workforce equipped with the crucial skills and expertise to support people to lead more active and healthy lifestyles – all of which are essential to supporting the health, wellness and productivity of the nation.

ukactive's Energy Risk Survey showed the ongoing pressure caused by energy costs, with 24% of council areas facing leisure centre closures or reduced services by September, and 63% of private operators forced to consider increasing prices. Fragility has arisen due to significant shifts in the landscape of public sector leisure over the past decade, leading to a diversified and sometimes misunderstood sector lacking a unified purpose and vision. Due to financial strain on Local Authorities and its non-statutory status, public sector leisure delivery increasingly prioritises commercial income over customer-focused services.

**Policy:** ukactive calls for long-term capital investment to future proof public sector leisure facilities, enabling them to continue to provide essential services to communities, while saving councils money and reducing their carbon footprint.

## 5. Improve levels of activity among children

Active children are more likely to become active adults. The current crisis in children and young people's health carries significant implications for their future, with rising risks of chronic diseases, obesity, and mental illness. The PE and Sport Premium has aided primary schools in achieving this goal in the short term, providing £320m in government funding. However, often this funding arrives too late for schools to effectively plan and deliver quality PE and sports provision.

### *Opening School Facilities*

**Policy:** ukactive calls for the next Government to commit to the continuation of a ringfenced three-year Opening School Facilities investment of £57m, ensuring children and young people have access to activity spaces over the summer holidays in disadvantaged communities, supporting them to access local, affordable and healthy activities.

### *Continuation of the PE and School Sport Premium*

**Policy:** Alongside support for physical activity outside school hours, ukactive calls for the extension of the ringfenced PE, sport, and physical activity premium until at least 2030. This would enable schools to implement long-term, sustainable interventions for children's health. The School Sport and Activity Action Plan pledges to ensure children have access to a minimum of 60 minutes of sport and physical activity daily, with 30 minutes recommended during school hours.