

C14. Outstanding Leadership Team Award Nominees

Alliance Leisure Development Board

Alliance Leisure's Leadership Team (our Development Board) provides comprehensive executive leadership: strategic engagement, client partnerships, commercial and delivery governance, finance, and marketing and framework management. We set direction while protecting culture, operating through a deliberately flat structure that enables rapid decision-making and clear accountability.

The team combines almost 300 years of leadership experience across public leisure, health, sport and infrastructure, including roles within governing bodies, operators and advisory positions shaping sector policy. Crucially, this insight is actively applied, with external experience brought back into the business to inform delivery.

Over the past 12 months, we have strengthened governance and credibility through the appointment of Non-Executive Directors Tara Dillon and David Stalker, adding independent challenge as we scale. At the same time, the business has delivered exceptional growth, with turnover more than doubling and the team expanding to 47 colleagues with no leavers. This reflects not just commercial success, but a leadership approach that supports stability and retention.

Our priorities are clear: sustainable growth, high-performance delivery and people development. Through Investors in People Gold and the Alliance Academy, we are developing future leaders. Senior leaders take a hands-on role in mentoring colleagues, creating a culture where people feel trusted and empowered. This drives strong retention and performance.

We have translated strategy into delivery, completing more than 30 projects in 2025/26 and building an investment pipeline approaching £1bn. This demonstrates delivery at scale, managing complexity across a national programme.

Sustainability is demonstrated through Investors in the Environment Green accreditation, a 47.9% reduction in transport emissions and progress on Carbon Literacy.

Why we should win: This leadership team stands out because it is actively shaping the future of the sector, not simply operating within it. We combine deep, cross-sector experience with real delivery capability, influencing how public leisure is funded, designed and delivered.

Our model is distinctive. We operate without traditional hierarchy, enabling faster decisions, stronger collaboration and direct access to leadership. This creates an environment where ideas progress quickly and individuals are developed, resulting in consistently high performance.

Beyond our organisation, we play a visible leadership role across the sector through advisory positions, partnerships and thought leadership. We translate this insight into action, applying it at scale across our projects.

The sector faces significant structural challenges and needs leadership that combines credibility, delivery and innovation. Our team provides that leadership, unlocking investment, setting standards and enabling sustainable impact for communities across the UK.

Durham County Council's Wellbeing, Sport & Leisure Management Team

Durham County Council's Wellbeing, Sport & Leisure Management Team is a powerhouse of passion, purpose and performance. With over 150 years of collective experience, this dynamic group has reimaged our offer, blending community wellbeing, sport and leisure provision, and innovation to drive engagement amongst communities across the county, supporting the collective mantra – more people, more active, more often.

Guided by a robust service plan and physical activity framework, the team plays a key role in delivering the County's bold ambition: "when you move together, communities thrive." It's not just a strapline; it's an ethos that runs through our entire strategy.

This year, the team continued to transform community provision and facilities creating pathways which support people at every stage of their life's journey, reshaping what leisure means locally. Standout achievements include:

- 2,400 new fitness members
- Over 10,000 people starting their movement journey and an additional 1,200+ members using Move Hubs
- 150,000 play facility visits
- 4,025 new casual users
- 10% increase in footfall in centres
- 25,000 online enquiries through our upgraded digital experience
- 40,000 app users
- 1.4 million website visits

The integration of our CRM with XN has created a seamless, end-to-end digital journey, enabling real-time tracking, monitoring and targeted activity - ultimately driving increased participation and improved retention.

Despite annual reductions in budget and staffing, we continue to grow by adjusting our mindset and approach. Our matrix leadership model allows the team to harness specialist skills across key areas: Customer Experience, Active Environments, Assets, Business Development, Marketing & Communications, Products & Programmes, and Place-based Partnerships. This ensures activity is focused, agile and impactful.

Place-based work, especially in areas of high deprivation, is central to our approach. The focus supports activities both indoors and outdoors, working alongside communities, targeted at those with generational health issues, and the lowest levels of activity in some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country. We have utilised place-based funding from Sport England to support the lives of people within East Durham, this learning is now being used to develop further pilots across the county.

Humour is required daily and every day we face a different challenge. As a team we balance our strengths and weaknesses to maximise delivery. We all want success and collectively work together to achieve goals.

This is just the start and although we are proud of our achievements so far there is much more to do – bring it on!!

GLL National Aquatics Team

The GLL National Aquatics Team, a core central group and regional Hub Managers, oversee instruction for 250,000 weekly pupils across 140+ UK pools. United by a shared mission to ensure their communities can learn to swim and be water safe, they collaborate to drive sector innovation. Their leadership extends far beyond GLL, providing sector-wide support through prominent roles including Chair of CLUK's Swim Group, Vice Chair of the Swimming Alliance, and representation at APPGs for Swimming and Water Safety.

Outstanding Achievement and Team Impact

Addressing the industry's severe swimming teacher shortage, the team demonstrated exceptional problem-solving by partnering with the STA to establish a groundbreaking Teacher Training Academy, training 900 new teachers annually. Furthermore, the leadership team utilised in-house expertise to achieve a strategic goal: fundamentally redesigning the Swimming lesson model. This pupil-centric approach features a 'Team Teaching Model' building robust career pathways, a flexible 'same day, same time' format removing parent barriers and a unique 'Swim Guarantee'.

This redesign earned the RLSS UK Water Safety Education Partner award and international recognition via IFSTA accreditation. The team relentlessly measures impact; an industry-first Pro Insight mystery shop yielded an 89.5% average score, +53 NPS, and 97% child enjoyment. Beyond standard lessons, the team launched Intensive Schools Swimming, reducing transport barriers and boosting pupil attainment by up to 40%, and revolutionised adult lessons with flexible bookings, normalising the journey to increase participation by a third and drive long-term membership.

Rationale for Winning

The team deserves this award for exceptional, forward-thinking collaboration that actively shapes the aquatics industry. They are the driving force behind the Swimming Alliance, uniting 27 organisations into a strong sector voice. By partnering with the STA, they revolutionised workforce supply, while collaborations with brands like easyJet and Capri-Sun elevate swimming awareness. They proactively tackle inequality, partnering

with Level Water to support over 1,300 SEND children weekly, and expanded their RLSS partnership to deliver bi-annual school water safety assemblies.

Their relentless drive is recognised by industry peers: STA CEO Dave Candler notes GLL demonstrates "genuine leadership... shaping the future direction of the aquatics industry," while last year's ukactive Outstanding Individual Leader award winner Jo Talbot, Director at RLSS UK praises their "unwavering commitment to saving lives through water safety education."

Move Southwark Leadership Team

The Move Southwark leadership team was established to deliver one of the borough's most complex transformations: the successful insourcing of leisure services into a council-led model while redefining their role in improving community health and wellbeing.

The team brings together strategic, operational, commercial, financial, and community expertise, including the Head of Leisure, senior functional leads, General Managers, and Learning and Development partners. Operating through a collaborative leadership model, the team works across shared KPIs, cross-functional projects, and regular governance forums to ensure aligned decision-making and accountability. This structure has enabled a unified, purpose-driven approach focused on delivering measurable social and operational impact.

The team's core goal was not simply to transfer services, but to build a sustainable, resident-focused leisure model. Key achievements include the successful mobilisation of multiple facilities into direct council management with full service continuity, alongside the opening of a new leisure centre during transition. At the same time, the team repositioned the service around increasing participation, reducing inequalities, and improving wellbeing, introducing initiatives such as open water swimming and expanded inclusive programmes.

Facing significant challenges—including organisational uncertainty, staff transfer, and financial pressure—the team responded with clear, values-led leadership. They implemented structured transition planning, regular staff engagement forums, and visible on-site leadership, ensuring stability and maintaining service quality. Financial resilience was strengthened through improved reporting, efficiency measures, and commercially sustainable programming while protecting accessibility for residents.

Crucially, the team has combined operational delivery with cultural transformation. Investment in leadership development, workforce capability, and consistent service standards has created a resilient, engaged workforce able to deliver change. Skills in change management, strategic planning, and community-focused service design have been actively applied to achieve outcomes.

What makes this team exceptional is its ability to deliver large-scale operational transformation while redefining the purpose of public leisure. It has successfully balanced commercial sustainability with social value, embedding community impact, health outcomes, and inclusivity at the core of service delivery.

Move Southwark is no longer just operating leisure centres; it is improving lives, strengthening communities, and supporting public health outcomes across the borough. The leadership team's collaborative approach, clarity of purpose, and demonstrable impact make them a standout example of leadership excellence and a deserving winner of this award.

Sport and Leisure – City St George's, University of London

The Sport and Leisure Service at City St George's, University of London oversees CitySport and drives active lifestyles across and beyond the university campuses. In 2024, following years of underperformance and risk of closure, a new Head of Sport was appointed to transform the Service. With his establishment of a new leadership structure consisting of two deputies, overseeing Sport Operations and Business Development, a focused, strategically aligned Leadership Team was created.

The Team's first action was to create the university's inaugural Vision for Sport and Leisure, providing clarity of purpose and direction. This was translated into a detailed Delivery Plan with departmental and business-unit actions aligned to four Service objectives, each mapped directly to the university's central strategy. This alignment also enabled the Team to better communicate the value of sport to academic and non-sport-inclined colleagues, strengthening internal understanding. Representing within local networks, the Team have also elevated CitySport's profile within the community. As a result, the university Senate now recognises the wider institutional and community benefits of sport, and the updated University strategy explicitly references "Sport" for the first time.

The Leadership Team's strategic influence has been matched by operational success, and they have been acknowledged as sector-leading. Since their appointment, increases in memberships (by 55%), financial contribution (40%), utilisation (12%), and customer satisfaction (to +49 NPS) have occurred. Additionally, CitySport's usage growth was ranked 1st – by 4Global – for all UK educational facilities. Fourteen new programmes launched and safety standards were strengthened through a new Safeguarding in Sport Policy. Moreover, the Team evidenced the academic (engaged students are 17% more likely to achieve a 2.1 or First class degree) and societal (£1.4m generated in social value over the past 12 months) impact of sport. This newfound credibility enabled approval for a £400k gym refurbishment during a financially challenging period for the Higher Education sector.

Internally, the Team has delivered a cultural reset. The Delivery Plan clarified priorities and, in combination with a restructure and a collaboratively developed Team Charter, workplace motivation and relationships have blossomed. Staff satisfaction is now at its highest level, reflected in annual surveys. Externally, the Head of Sport was elected to Chair all London universities relating to Sport and was appointed to the IOC's Technology in Sport Committee.

The Leisure Focus Leadership Team

Leisure Focus Trust is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) and leisure operator delivering sport, health, and physical activity services across Berkshire — reinvesting all surplus into facilities, programmes, and communities. The leadership team comprises of executive leads across operations, HR, business development, finance, and contract management, supported by a governance board including two MBE recipients, mobilised a fully operational CIO from concept to trading in five months in 2020, with shared accountability across governance, compliance, finance, operations, and community impact.

The scale of what has been built since is remarkable. Of the 325,811 companies registered in the UK in 2020, only 38% are still operating today (Companies House). Leisure Focus Trust is one of them and has not merely survived. The team secured the initial RBWM contract in August 2020 on an interim basis, and in April 2025 following open procurement won a 15-year strategic contract award, demonstrating confidence and financial sustainability. In 2025, the team accelerated growth: launching a joint venture partnership with Tom Dean's swim school as a significant national partner, securing a new 20-year single-site contract and establishing professional services agreements with Education Partners. This expansion reflects the leadership team's vision and commercial acumen. Operationally, they launched Vision 2030 — "Less Clutter. More Intention. Better Quality", a strategy to refine systems, enhance delivery, and create frictionless customer experiences.

The challenges faced have been extraordinary. From a forcibly closed industry and lockdown uncertainty, through the energy crisis, the cost of living crisis, and successive central government policy shifts, this team navigated compounding pressures that would have ended lesser organisations. They responded collaboratively, developing supported workforce practices, building stakeholder confidence through transparent engagement, and attracting exceptional talent. Competencies developed and shared governance and compliance, financial modelling under uncertainty, commercial partnership development, brand-building, change leadership, and community engagement reflect the depth of this collective effort.

Arguably no leadership team in this sector has faced a steeper start. To build from scratch during a pandemic, outlast 62% of all businesses formed in the same year, secure a 15-year contract through open competition, and stand today as a financially resilient, strategically ambitious operator is exceptional by any measure. What makes this team outstanding is not just what they have achieved, but how: with passion, proactivity, and a deep-rooted belief that leisure changes lives. They have built something genuinely durable, a brand the community trusts, a workforce that thrives, partnerships that scale impact nationally, and a clear 2030 vision. They are leadership excellence in action.

The My Healthy Way Leadership Team (Parkwood Leisure)

The My Healthy Way (MHW) leadership team, comprised of Hannah Gilday (Head of Healthy Communities & Partnerships), Katie Buckley (Health & Wellbeing Operations Lead) and Andy Farr (Strategic Director), is designed to bridge the gap between traditional leisure management and clinical healthcare. My Healthy Way is a result of bringing together Parkwood Leisure and Parkwood Healthcare and the new structure is purposefully integrated: Andy provides high-level strategic vision and stakeholder alignment; Hannah translates this into inclusive community partnerships; and Katie ensures clinical governance and operational excellence. Their shared purpose is to address health inequalities by transforming leisure centres into community health hubs through a "Whole System Approach".

In 2025, the team's development plans yielded exceptional results, including a 12% increase in physical activity engagement among priority groups. Under their leadership, the team successfully scaled the Musculoskeletal (MSK) Hub project to engage 2,500 participants across 23,000 hours of bespoke MSK activity, with five sites achieving "Flagship Status" for clinical quality. To future-proof this clinical delivery, the team established a landmark partnership with the University of East London, providing Master's students with 250 hours of clinical placement. This initiative has directly grown the workforce, for example, successfully transitioning a student from a placement role into a permanent Clinical Exercise Physiologist position within the team's GP referral services.

A significant challenge the team faced was the inefficiency of manual health referral pathways. They responded collaboratively by embedding the "ReferAll" digital management system across 14 contracts. This data-led response resulted in a 385% increase in referrals in Bexley, the total elimination of client waiting lists, and secured over £250,000 in external grants. Furthermore, they developed the "My Healthy Weight" pilot to support individuals using GLP-1 medications, showcasing their ability to innovate in response to emerging national health trends.

They have moved beyond "managing gyms" to delivering life-saving health interventions, evidenced by securing a trademark license with NHS England for the "Be Body Aware" cancer campaign and launching a pioneering "Well+" partnership with Bupa to integrate digital GP and mental health support into leisure memberships. Their commitment to equity is peerless; Lex Leisure was crowned the 2025 UK Active EDI Award winner under their guidance, and the team became a signatory of the IWG Brighton Plus Helsinki Declaration on gender equity. The MHW team represents a standout example of how collaborative, evidence-based leadership can fundamentally support the mission of getting the nation more active.

Y Awards Senior Leadership Team and Y Awards Management Team

An unexpected change in organisational leadership required YMCA Awards' Senior Leadership Team to navigate a fundamental shift from a centralised, single decision-maker to a collaborative, empowered leadership structure. The newly formed SLT operates with a Management Team layer operating departmentally.

The team set aligned goals: stabilise operations through decentralised, accountable decision-making; grow market share; and build internal capability through a sustainable leadership pipeline. Delivery plans included succession planning, restructured governance, and targeted action plans addressing legacy operational constraints.

The challenges were significant, inefficient legacy processes, structural limitations slowing innovation, and historic decisions misaligned with market needs. The team responded collaboratively: surfacing constraints with departments, co-creating practical solutions, and embedding sustainable improvements. Skills developed and applied across the team included strategic decision-making, cross-functional collaboration, talent development, and regulatory foresight.

The results, achieved despite the scale of change, were exceptional:

- 17% year-on-year income growth
- 4% growth in market share (gym and PT)
- 12% growth in market share (Pilates)
- One leaver from a team of 15 — a voluntary turnover rate of 6.7%, set against a UK average of 34% (CIPD analysis of the ONS Annual Population Survey)
- 5 internal promotions, demonstrating a working leadership pipeline; external recruitment only to backfill positions created through promotion

"Since being promoted to Head of Quality & Assessment, I've moved from oversight of processes to shaping direction, strengthening governance, and anticipating future regulatory challenges."

— Vicki, Head of Quality & Assessment

"My promotion to Policy & Compliance Manager reflected the opportunity to operate at a more strategic level, shaping policy and strengthening regulatory engagement."

— Simeon, Policy & Compliance Manager

"Stepping into Head of Awards, I had the privilege of leading the organisation through a significant period of change. What stands out most is how the team embraced the challenge, taking ownership, and leading by example to create a more empowered, collaborative culture. The success we've achieved reflects not one leader, but a team that has fully committed to shaping the future of the organisation together."

— Lianne, Head of Awards

This team should win because they didn't just manage change, they transformed our operations. Commercial growth alongside cultural transformation, near-zero attrition, five internal promotions, and a market position defined by leadership in regulated



AWARDS

qualifications. Through trust, collaboration, and decisive leadership, this team has redefined the organisation and positioned it to lead the sector.