



Community-level sport and leisure

Roundtable Summary Report

Module 10 Impact on society



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Executive summary

This report does not represent the views of the Inquiry. The information reflects a summary of the experiences that were shared with us by attendees at our Roundtables in 2025. The range of experiences shared with us has helped us to develop themes that we explore below. You can find a list of the organisations who attended the roundtable in the annex of this report.

In May 2025, the UK Covid-19 Inquiry conducted a roundtable focused on the impact of the pandemic on community-level sport and leisure. This roundtable was held through a group discussion with sport, leisure and mental health organisations. The roundtable did not cover the impact of the pandemic on elite and professional sports.

There were some examples of effective collaboration between the government and the sector, particularly in relation to the provision of emergency funding and leveraging existing relationships to support the sector. However, representatives were frustrated by communication about guidance and restrictions, in particular, the lack of communication of a clear rationale for the guidance and the late announcement of some restrictions. This created confusion and hindered effective communication with organisations and their staff.

There was consensus that the sector was able to adapt quickly to support people when community-level sport and leisure activity was stopped. For instance, local sports organisations rapidly pivoted to online delivery models such as online exercise classes, developed outdoor exercise programmes, and loaned gym equipment to individuals to support them in maintaining some level of physical activity. Furthermore, some community and leisure venues that had to close were repurposed as vaccination centres to support broader community needs. Generally, representatives found that the pandemic provided an opportunity for innovation, with organisations having time to develop new programmes, enhance their hygiene standards, improve professionalism and explore alternative ways to engage with their members, through digital mental health support and befriending services.

Repeated emphasis was placed on the stress and financial strain caused by the pandemic and the restrictions. In particular, the discussion focussed on the loss of revenue and reduced membership from the immediate closure of venues and

services. Yet, businesses were still paying overhead costs. Representatives highlighted how smaller operators and grassroots clubs faced significant financial pressure and were less resilient, having fewer financial reserves on which to draw than larger organisations. Financial support was seen as vital. However, some felt it was more difficult to access for community and private sector organisations and this affected their ability to stay afloat.

Staff faced additional responsibilities to ensure compliance with Covid-19 guidelines and extra administrative tasks. This was exacerbated by a decline in volunteers. This decline began before the pandemic but was accelerated, in part, by people losing their jobs during the pandemic and focusing their efforts on paid work rather than volunteering. The decline in volunteers made it harder to run activities and events.

The immediate closure of venues and the pause in face-to-face activities at the start of the pandemic severely restricted the ability of many to take part in community-level sport and leisure activities. This led to reduced physical activity levels, impacted leisure routines and decreased engagement in organised sports. People's social interactions and engagement with their community also decreased as a result. Representatives said this resulted in the most significant recorded decline in physical activity levels in England with approximately 1,223,000 fewer adults meeting recommended activity levels. They reported that the decline in physical activity levels was not due to a lack of public interest, but because of the limitations imposed by lockdowns and social distancing measures.

The impact on physical activity levels was not uniform across demographic groups. Some were less active during the pandemic, including those from ethnic minorities, individuals from lower social economic backgrounds, those with a disability and people with pre-existing mental health conditions. Representatives described how these groups faced greater barriers to accessing alternative forms of physical activity, such as not having access to outside spaces or having to shield, which hindered their opportunity to exercise outside. Some organisations reported that men initially experienced a steeper decline in relative activity levels due to their reliance on team sports and gyms. Women were said to be better able to adapt to home based exercise and individual outdoor activities, like walking and running. Sport in Mind acknowledged that the sudden change from in-person to digital offerings may have presented extra challenges for some people with mental health conditions at a time when many were already

experiencing numerous challenges in the day-to-day management of their wellbeing during a global pandemic.

The pandemic was said to have brought greater public attention to the link between physical activity and mental health and wellbeing. Representatives welcomed the explicit inclusion of physical activity and exercise in pandemic guidance as a permissible reason for being outside during lockdown. They also consistently emphasised the negative impact of closures and restrictions on mental health, particularly for those with pre-existing mental health conditions. The loss of structured activity and the opportunity for social connection had a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing. This was felt to have highlighted the importance of community-level sport and leisure in supporting people's mental health.

Several key lessons were identified for future pandemic preparedness. They include the need to improve government's understanding of the sector's operations and its vital role in supporting mental health and wellbeing, improving communication and consultation between government and the sector and more flexible and accessible funding mechanisms.

Key themes

Impact of restrictions on community-level sport and leisure sector

Impact of government guidance and communication

At the start of the pandemic, community-level sport and leisure venues were required to close immediately, as part of the restrictions put in place by the government.¹ Representatives discussed the impact pandemic restrictions and guidance issued by the government had on the sector. Changes were often announced very late and without sufficient consultation. When changes to guidance happened the night before they were due to be implemented, this exacerbated the challenges faced by those required to implement the changes. Furthermore, the guidance sometimes lacked detail and clarity about why decisions were being made. This was particularly important where decisions related to specific types of venues or activities which were to be closed or reopened. Overall, this made it difficult for organisations to adapt and communicate changes effectively to their members and staff to ensure compliance.

“There were numerous examples of things being announced the night before being imposed without much link with the sector. I understand it was an unprecedented situation but it made onward communication in a consistent and timely way more difficult which created further problems.”

Sport and Recreation Alliance

¹ The government announcement of the closure of indoor and outdoor sports facilities:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>

Financial impact on the sector

The pandemic had a widespread, immediate and negative financial impact across the community-level sport and leisure sector according to representatives. Facilities lost millions of pounds weekly and grassroots clubs faced the risk of permanent closure. ukactive said that closures were predominantly seen amongst smaller operators and that between 50-100 closed during the lockdown period. By contrast, larger organisations had a greater capacity to draw on their cash reserves to assist them in staying afloat. Even so, it was noted that regardless of size, organisations faced considerable financial strain during the pandemic.

"[For gyms, pools and leisure centres], immediate closure saw immediate loss of [the] revenue which kept them going. A major gym operator [was] losing 8 million pounds... [per] week."

ukactive

The temporary closure of grassroots sports clubs severely impacted their ability to generate revenue and reinvest in their services. Representatives explained that these clubs faced reduced income as a result of falls in membership, but were also struggling with ongoing overhead costs. The Sport and Recreation Alliance said restrictions on the ability to stage live elite and professional sport made it harder for major sports bodies to reinvest money at the grassroots level.

"There was enormous pressure at [the] grassroots level... there is a link between the ability to generate income at elite level and how that is then reinvested at grassroots."

Sport and Recreation Alliance

There was widespread consensus that additional funding from the government and the National Lottery, to address the impact of the pandemic on the sector, played a crucial role in supporting organisations financially. For example, Sport England explained that the government introduced a £110 million fund from March to December 2021 to support public leisure facilities. This funding allowed centres to be maintained and supported as they prepared to reopen. Sport England spoke positively about the flexibility of this funding, as organisations were able to decide how to spend the money in a way that would support their

survival. However, representatives reflected that there was more limited funding for private gyms and leisure centres, pointing to a lack of furlough support and grants. ukactive added that private gyms and leisure centres were still required to pay rent at a time when they had no income and had to lobby the government for support. Grassroots community clubs also faced challenges accessing government support, for example, due to differences in the way local authorities administered grants.

There were instances of successful collaboration with the government. Sport England collaborated with the government and used National Lottery Funding to develop a Community Emergency Fund which gave community sports clubs and organisations immediate emergency support for when they were closed. Open for six weeks, the £35m fund made 7,489 awards. Sport Wales also said they leveraged their existing relationship with the Welsh government to engage the private sector and professional sport organisations in a Private Sector Support Scheme. This was introduced for gym owners to support them to remain solvent.

“We provided for the Community Emergency Fund. It was open for 6 weeks only, it was an immediate opportunity to put Lottery money available to organisations across the country with, to be honest, a minimal level of due diligence around need. By providing that immediate support, we sustained the sector somewhat and to enable groups to survive.”

Sport England

Impact on the workforce

The Sport and Recreation Alliance noted the substantial size of the workforce in the sector, which includes paid and volunteer staff, as well as sole traders like instructors and coaches. Restrictions on sport and leisure activities and the closure of venues meant many staff lost their income.

Mind described how a significant proportion of staff employed by organisations in the sector were furloughed during the pandemic. However, some, who were self-employed, were not eligible for furlough. This had a negative impact not only on their finances but also on their mental health.

Representatives also noted that planning and implementing pandemic measures significantly increased the workload of paid staff and volunteers who continued to work. The Sport and Recreation Alliance explained that staff and volunteers faced an increase in administrative tasks to ensure safe operations in line with Covid-19 guidance.

The increased workload was compounded by a decline in volunteer numbers. The reduction in the number of volunteers in the sector was said to have added to the strain on remaining volunteers and paid workers. This was a particular issue in the community-level sport and leisure sector because it is reliant on volunteers for many of its activities. Sport Wales said that prior to the pandemic there was already an observed decline in the number of people volunteering, but the pandemic had accelerated this decline. Sport England's Active Lives survey revealed a sustained decrease in volunteer activity since the pandemic and this has affected the sector's ongoing ability to deliver sports activities. Sport and Recreation Alliance believed that one reason for the decline in volunteer numbers during the pandemic may have been because some volunteers had lost their jobs and had to prioritise paid employment rather than volunteering.

“I think there was already a [declining] slope that some volunteering activity was in due to societal change. I think it just made the slope steeper and accelerated it.”

Sport Wales

Adapting to the pandemic and its impact

Representatives described the steps the community-level sport and leisure sector took to adapt to help reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on physical activity. They gave examples of organisations pivoting quickly to online exercise classes, outdoor programmes, loaning gym equipment and home workout packages to support people to stay physically active.

Facilities that had closed down were also able to repurpose their venues for community needs during the pandemic; for example, by reopening as vaccination centres or foodbanks. Sport and Recreation Alliance felt that this helped ensure these organisations and venues could continue to serve their local communities despite not being able to offer sporting activities.

“There was more... facilities being used for something else. Many professional clubs have community trusts who ran foodbanks and community support.”

Sport and Recreation Alliance

Another way the community-level sport and leisure sector adapted was by making use of pre-existing outdoor spaces to continue supporting physical activity in a safe way. For example, some venues made their car parks accessible for socially distanced exercise.

Representatives also discussed how pandemic restrictions gave organisations a strong incentive to innovate, developing new services to support communities. Some clubs and venues began to provide mental health support remotely. The Sport and Recreation Alliance thought this benefitted the mental health of club members and enabled them to make good use of staff time during the pandemic. Sport in Mind said the pandemic meant they had the time to develop their Young People's Programme to find new ways of helping young people.

According to ukactive, the pandemic encouraged improvements in the professionalism of the community sport and leisure sector. They mentioned the development of the "Active Standard," which is a quality mark for the physical activity sector to improve risk management and operational standards. The introduction of this quality mark was largely driven by the emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene standards to maintain Covid-19 safety in sport and leisure venues.

Impact of restrictions on communities

Overall impact of restrictions on the level of physical activity

The restrictions on community-level sport and leisure activity was said to have caused the most significant drop in physical activity levels ever recorded in England. Sport England said that the number of people living an inactive lifestyle rose during the pandemic.² In 2018/19 statistics from the Office for National Statistics found that there were 24.6 million people in the UK living an inactive lifestyle. This rose by 27.1%, equating to 1.2 million more people living inactively, with negative consequences for their mental and physical health.

The immediate closure of sport and leisure facilities at the start of the pandemic decreased opportunities for physical activity. This included organised activities like team and grassroots sports and dance. Sport and Recreation Alliance stated that the number of people participating in team sports went down from 3.5 million pre-pandemic to 2 million during the pandemic.

The closure of gyms, pools and leisure centres during the pandemic led to 700 million fewer visits compared to pre-Covid levels. People's desire to stay active had not diminished, but pandemic restrictions prevented people from being physically active. This, in turn, affected their mental health and wellbeing.

Sport England observed that the shift to remote working meant that 4.2 million people were no longer walking as part of their commute. However, according to their research, the number of people walking for leisure rose.

“We did consumer polling in September 2021 on national fitness day which showed that less than a third of UK adults were as physically fit as they would have liked to have been during the pandemic.”

ukactive

²Physical inactivity is defined as doing less than 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a week.

Despite the innovative efforts to allow sports and leisure activities to continue, representatives noted that, for some activities, participation rates have not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels. For example, the Sport and Recreation Alliance emphasised the lasting impact of swimming facilities closing. In particular, children and young people who were unable to access swimming lessons during the pandemic were likely to face long term impacts in terms of lower swimming attainment and lack of important water safety skills.

There was a consensus that lockdown restrictions had exacerbated existing disparities in physical activity levels for ethnic minorities, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and people with poor mental health. Sport England explained that the disparity in physical activity levels between White British and Black and Asian people widened. For example, their Active Lives survey found that while the activity levels of White British people decreased by 1.5%, Black people saw a decline of 4.5%, and Asian people by 4.4%.

In addition, Sport England said that people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were better shielded from the pandemic's impact on physical activity levels. They thought this was due to these groups having more opportunities to stay active, including having access to outside space at home.

There was a view that men had faced greater disruption to their physical activity levels earlier in the pandemic, as they typically relied more on team sports and gym-based activities. Although men remained active in greater numbers than women, overall they faced a steeper drop in physical activity levels during the pandemic. Sport England said that women were often better at finding alternative ways to stay active, such as engaging in home workouts or walking with family members. They felt that women tended to favour activities that could be performed at home.

There was an acknowledgment that individuals with disabilities, mental health conditions and older adults faced further barriers to physical activity during the pandemic due to an increased fear and risk of Covid-19. Those with disabilities and older adults were often instructed to shield from Covid-19, which decreased their ability to participate in physical activity. A survey by Activity Alliance, highlighted by Sport and Recreation Alliance, found that nearly half of disabled respondents expressed concern about leaving their homes during the pandemic, compared to about a third of non-disabled respondents. This concern was said to limit their engagement in physical activities, despite public health advice emphasising the importance of staying active to maintain physical health during the pandemic.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

There was consensus on the negative impact on people's mental health and wellbeing of closing community-level sports and leisure venues. The Sport and Recreation Alliance shared findings from a survey they had conducted which found over half of sports clubs who responded felt the lockdowns had a negative effect on their members personally and on their mental health and wellbeing in particular.

Representatives highlighted the importance of the rules allowing people to exercise outside once a day for people's mental health, which were widely supported by the sector. Personal testimonials received by several operators highlighted the importance of sports facilities for mental health and wellbeing, according to ukactive.

There was a strongly held view that the closure of community-level sport and leisure venues highlighted their vital role within communities, not just for activity, but also for social connection and mental wellbeing. Representatives felt this led to greater appreciation of the benefits provided by these organisations and services and has since improved opportunities for public funding and support for sports and activity initiatives. Sport Wales referred to collaboration with Welsh Sports and Mental Health Ministers which has resulted in additional funding, enhancing the sector's significance. ukactive noted that the sector's improved understanding of consumer preferences on physical activity during the pandemic has provided a stronger foundation and clearer direction for promoting community-level sport and leisure.

"It's less about the physical activity and more about being outside or in a group setting and having someone you can rely on and who values and cares about you. It's that whole package"

Mind

Representatives also emphasised that it was particularly difficult for those with mental health conditions to maintain their physical activity levels during the pandemic. Sport in Mind said their activity-based support offered to those with mental health conditions was stopped overnight as their face-to-face services were closed and they were not set up to deliver services online. They felt this affected those who were already cautious to engage and did not feel

comfortable online.

"If you have a mental health problem everything becomes a challenge to be honest. If you're... [not familiar] with the digital world you sometimes get scared of it. If you are not... [confident using computers] it's then a further barrier, something new or complicated you have to do. I don't think you can nail it to a particular kind of person who is 'scared of using a computer', but it brings in a lot of concerns for people."

Sport in Mind

The closure of sport and leisure facilities had a particular impact on those prescribed physical activity by their GP to support their mental health³. During the pandemic prescribed physical activity stopped, affecting the mental health of those accessing those services, according to Mind.

Mind also shared that the prevalence of mental health conditions increased during the pandemic, in part because of the pandemic restrictions on physical activity. They pointed to research they had conducted that found that 76% of adults, who use physical activity as a tool to support their mental health, saw their regular structured activity closing. Mind thought this had a negative impact on people's mental health and created challenges for the organisation who were in the midst of delivering social prescribing support before the pandemic.

Despite a reduction in their prescribed physical activity services during the pandemic, Mind successfully identified and implemented alternative solutions that adhered to pandemic restrictions.

Through their partnership with the English Football League, they helped launch befriending services, online sessions combining mental health support and physical activity, and doorstep food deliveries with wellbeing check-ins. They said this meant those receiving support felt less lonely and were better looked after during the pandemic.

³ Social prescribing is a healthcare approach that connects patients to non-medical support and activities in their local community to improve their health and wellbeing. Rather than only prescribing medication or medical treatments, healthcare providers can "prescribe" or refer patients to a range of community-based services and activities. More information on this topic is available from [NHS England](https://www.england.nhs.uk/social-prescribing/).

“[Befriend ing services] bridged the gap, [it] made people feel less lonely. Particularly those [people] without family members who could do those visits for [them]... Massive impact there.”

Mind

Lessons for future pandemics

Representatives suggested key lessons that can be learned from the experience of the community-level sport and leisure sector to better prepare for and respond to future pandemics.

- **Enhance the government's understanding of and engagement with the community-level sport and leisure sector:** Representatives felt that government decision-makers should have a deep understanding of how the sport and leisure sector operates, for example by visiting facilities and observing activities. They thought this would enhance decision-making about restrictions in a future pandemic.
- **Improve communication between the government and sector stakeholders:** Improving communication between the government and the sector was seen as a priority for representatives. They felt this would facilitate collaboration and policy development during a pandemic in a way that would be directly applicable to community-level sport and leisure.
- **Increase flexibility of funding for the sector:** Representatives welcomed the flexible approach to funding in the pandemic and felt this should be adopted in any future pandemic, enabling organisations to use it in a way that suits their financial needs. They also felt that funding should be more accessible to grassroots community and private sector organisations.
- **Recognise the value of community-level sport and leisure:** Representatives wanted future pandemic planning to reflect the vital health and wellbeing benefits of being active and incorporate the perspectives of those directly engaged in community-level sport and leisure. This includes ensuring public health messaging during a pandemic places emphasis on physical activity being a tool to support mental health.

Annex

Roundtable structure

In May 2025, the UK Covid Inquiry held a roundtable to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the community-level sport and leisure sector. This roundtable included one breakout group discussion.

This roundtable is one of a series being carried out for Module 10 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, which is investigating the impact of the pandemic on the UK population. The module also aims to identify areas where societal strengths, resilience, and/or innovation reduced any adverse impact of the pandemic. The roundtable was facilitated by Ipsos UK and held virtually.

A diverse range of organisations were invited to the roundtable; the list of attendees includes only those who attended the discussion on the day. Attendees at the breakout group discussion were representatives for:

- Sport England
- ukactive
- Sport and Recreation Alliance
- Sport Wales
- Sport in Mind
- Mind

Module 10 roundtables

In addition to the roundtable on community level sport and leisure, the UK Covid-19 Inquiry has held roundtable discussions on the following topics:

- The faith groups and places of worship roundtable heard from faith leaders and organisations representing religious groups about the unique pressures and risks they faced during the pandemic.
- The Domestic abuse support and safeguarding roundtable engaged with organisations that support victims and survivors of domestic abuse to understand how lockdown measures and restrictions impacted access to support services and their ability to provide assistance to those that needed it the most.
- The Funerals, burials, and bereavement support roundtable explored the effects of restrictions on funerals and how bereaved families navigated their grief during the pandemic.
- The Justice system roundtable addressed the impact on those in prisons and detention centres, and those affected by court closures and delays.
- The Hospitality, retail, travel, and tourism industries roundtable engaged with business leaders to examine how closures, restrictions and reopening measures impacted these critical sectors.
- The Key workers roundtable heard from organisations representing key workers across a wide range of sectors about the unique pressures and risks they faced during the pandemic.
- The Cultural institutions roundtable considered the effects of closures and restrictions on museums, theatres and other cultural institutions.
- The Housing and homelessness roundtable explored how the pandemic affected housing insecurity, eviction protections and homelessness support services.

Figure 1. How each roundtable feeds into M10

