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## **EXPERT COMMENT: To save our leisure centres from closure, we may need to hand them to the community**

**Many leisure centres survived austerity by transferring their management to the local community. In an article written for [The Conversation](#), Dr Lindsay Findlay-King, Principal Lecturer in Sport Management at Northumbria University, discusses whether this tactic could work again in today's crisis.**

Despite the UK's coronavirus lockdown beginning to ease in June, the majority of swimming pools, gyms and leisure centres are still [waiting to reopen](#).

This slow return – together with a lack of government financial support and the anticipated tentativeness of consumers – means that many public leisure services are facing significant difficulties. For some, costs already incurred under lockdown may mean [reopening isn't possible](#).

Most UK leisure services are operated by charitable trusts. Following four months of services being closed, [Community Leisure UK](#) – the members' association for leisure trusts – suggests that up to 35% of all public leisure facilities will be unable to reopen and that 48% face closure by the end of the year.

Last month, Vivacity – a charitable trust running libraries, pools and gyms in Peterborough – [gave notice](#) that it would need to return all its facilities to its local authority. Other trusts have received [bailouts](#) from local councils, but an urgent need for government support remains.

But with such support not forthcoming, an alternative could be for public

leisure services to be passed into the hands of the community. This has happened before in times of austerity, [particularly in 2011](#), when local authorities sought to [offload leisure assets](#) that they couldn't afford to operate. The more marketable assets were [taken on by trusts](#), while communities stepped in to [save others](#).

Now that we have a situation where more leisure facilities may be at risk, communities could again step in. In fact, [research my colleagues and I did](#) shows that community-run leisure services are a particularly viable option.

## **The rise of community-led services**

The provision of public sport and leisure facilities was already vulnerable before the pandemic. Historically, local authorities have been the main provider, after a spurt of leisure centre building [from the 1970s onwards](#). Gradually other types of providers arrived on the scene, although in 2006 local authorities were still the largest operator (controlling [42% of the sector](#)).

But since then, mounting financial pressures on local authorities have seen a [year-on-year decline](#) in their involvement. [Many leisure facilities have closed](#); the majority of those left are now [operated by charitable trusts](#). The pandemic means that these are now feeling the pinch.

Alongside these, there have always been some [facilities run by local community groups](#). Often these arrangements developed from campaigns to save facilities threatened with closure. Community-led set-ups differ from the larger trusts as they are small, led by volunteers and usually operate only one facility.

We've explored the [transfer of sport facilities](#) to volunteer-led community groups over the past 10 years, and [our findings](#) have shown many benefits. Services are more responsive to local needs, programmes are more creative and – importantly right now – costs can be reduced.

The small size of these community groups means they are able to closely monitor expenses, such as energy and other utilities and services, and shop around for the best prices. Having volunteers who help with day-to-day tasks and staff with interchangeable job roles can also keep staffing costs down.

We also found that activities running in centres are often reassessed so that space use is maximised. If a gym class fails to attract customers, it's swapped out of the programme straight away to save money. Community-led provision allows for quick decisions to be made that are well suited to a specific facility and community. Larger organisations often don't have this flexibility – they may be forced into providing set offerings.

Indeed, as one of the community trustees in our research said: “If you're a larger local authority or even a larger leisure trust ... you get told to roll out the corporate offers, and those corporate offers might not necessarily be what the local community wants or needs.” But when you're a small organisation, “you can make decisions based on what locals want”.

However, behind the benefits, many people we interviewed also spoke of challenges. The transfer and management of these facilities requires volunteers to give up significant time. Volunteers also need to have the appropriate knowledge, skills, confidence and tenacity to make the new set-ups work.

Running a community sports facility is therefore more challenging for some community groups than others, depending on levels of social capital, community stability and interest in facilities. We [heard evidence](#) of community ownership which had failed for some of these reasons.

It's important to note that community-run services still rely on support from their local authority to survive – in the form of peppercorn rents and rate relief, but also advice. We found some evidence of effective local authority support being given to community groups, but many we spoke to said support was insufficient and they had to develop their own knowledge and skills base.

## **But capacity is stretched everywhere**

What about this time around? How are communities or grassroots sports organisations placed if they need to step up and take on new facilities?

The pandemic has had [far-reaching effects](#) on communities. Changes in job security, the toll on health and stress levels may impact on the capacity to volunteer. Communities may also have multiple needs as they recover and people may volunteer depending on where [they view help is most needed](#). In such a changed landscape, helping save a local sports facility may not be as

important as in the past.

The financial position of [sport organisations](#) and [local authority services](#) which community set-ups might call upon for assistance is also precarious. This may make things more challenging too.

When communities save their local leisure facilities, their model of delivery can be effective, but they need support. Local authorities, sport governing bodies and national sport organisations need to plan now to give communities the best possible chance of succeeding.

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