



Returning to Action: Evaluating Organisational Preparedness in the Wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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1. Introduction

The Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University is pleased to present this report examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown restrictions on organisations delivering sport and physical activity in the United Kingdom. The research was commissioned to investigate the current outlook for community sport as restrictions are eased, with a particular focus on their readiness to return to action. The survey focusses primarily on voluntary clubs, which are the setting in which around 4 million people regularly take part in sport, though other organisation types, such as private companies and sole traders delivering coaching are included in the findings. An understanding of this sector of the sports' market is crucial to developing policy responses which will underpin efforts to match and eventually surpass pre-pandemic levels of participation in the community.

1.1. Context and Rationale

The purpose of this research is to develop comprehensive, cross-sector insight to better understand the impact of Covid-19 on organisations involved in the delivery of grassroots sport, physical activity, and movement opportunities. This includes each part of the delivery 'eco-system': national governing body (NGB) affiliated clubs; unaffiliated clubs; self-employed people running clubs; schools and classes as a business; charities involved with delivering sport for development, and; organisations using sport, physical activity, and movement either as a core or constituent part of their 'offer'.

Most other major research in this area is specific to discrete sub-sections of the eco-system, such as sport-specific voluntary clubs, organisations delivering active opportunities as part of sport for development projects, or organisations pertaining to specific protected characteristics (age, gender, additional needs, etc.). These studies may use different metrics and methodologies and therefore can prove difficult to reconcile. Outputs may lack clarity for strategic decision-makers and result in mixed messaging in terms of the scale, urgency and direction of the interventions required.

This is the first and only major study to attempt to cut across the full range of organisations delivering active opportunities to communities in the UK. By encompassing the entire eco-system, the study enables organisations that support active opportunity deliverers to assess the impact of restrictions across a set of common metrics, produced using the same methodology. It therefore allows for the most expedient and effective interventions to be identified at the global level, supporting the delivery of strategic and timely policy responses.

2. Our Approach

The scope of this work is to understand the nature and scale of the impact of restrictions designed to limit activity and assembly, introduced to limit the spread of Covid-19 ('lockdown') had on organisations' ability to provide active opportunities. In keeping with the Sport and Recreation Alliance's desire to generate a large working sample in a short period of time, an online survey was developed in cooperation with staff from the Alliance. The question design, wording, layout, and survey routing were piloted in January 2021, with the final survey being distributed by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and via the Sport for Development Coalition network in February and March. Responses were monitored regularly to ensure representation by individual sports using the 2017 study of affiliated clubs as a guide; Sport England produced this guide and also distributed the survey link for this project to clubs registered with its 'Club Matters' programme.

Respondents were asked to consider their position prior to the onset of the pandemic, to report the impact of the pandemic on their organisation at the time of their response (February, 2021); and to project the residual effects of this experience on their ability to reinstate active opportunities following the removal of restrictions. The effect of 'lockdown' is measured across several key areas including membership, active opportunities, paid workforce, volunteer workforce and organisational finances. Respondents also identify the reasons behind their answers, meaning this study provides insights regarding the scale of impact, the key factors driving them and the limitations these factors place on organisations' ability to reinstate active opportunities.

The survey introduces the concept of ‘active opportunity minutes’ as a measure of organisational ability to deliver activities. Borrowing from the work of Veal in measuring facility supply, this metric combines the capacity limit of an activity session provided by respondent organisations, with their frequency and duration, to produce a weekly total number of activity minutes:

$$\text{Session Capacity} \times \text{No. of Sessions per Week} \times \text{Session Duration} = \text{Active Opportunity Minutes}$$

This is not a measure of actual delivery, but of capacity – in other words, a measure of potential supply designed to evaluate organisational readiness, rather than an expression of demand. The formula can also be adapted to calculate volunteering capacity, viz.:

$$\text{No. of Volunteers per Week} \times \text{Avg. Time Given per Week} = \text{Volunteer Opportunity Minutes}$$

The Alliance provided support in engaging with NGBs to encourage their clubs to complete the survey. The overall objective of the data collection process was to collect the views of the largest possible sample of those organisations which were delivering sport, physical activity, and movement opportunities before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, to understand the impact of lockdown on such organisations at the time that the restrictions on activity were introduced. While retrospective financial data were collected in support of this analysis, a full financial forecast was thought to be prohibitively difficult for most community sport providers and was therefore not attempted in the survey.

2.1. Data Processing

On receipt of data from the survey, records were checked for accuracy and completeness, with particular reference to postcode information. As a means of fixing location, postcodes served as a useful point of reference since they allowed clubs to be mapped with sufficient accuracy for comparison with other units of geography and were easily verifiable online. This enabled analysis of the data against measures of deprivation and a comparison between organisations in urban and rural locations. Internet searches were used to confirm location information for clubs with no spatial references, although the success rate varied between datasets.

Key Points

- Community sport providers were invited to complete an online survey over a six-week period from February to March, 2021
- The questionnaire was designed to collect data relating to participation, workforce facilities and finance, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The survey generated 1,406 responses from organisations providing more than 75 sports.

3. Results

3.1. Initial Findings

The final survey sample size was 1,406, of which 1,074 (77%) were from voluntary clubs. Of the total sample, 26 sports generated 30 or more responses, enabling some sub-sample analysis for those activities, though some caution is necessary in terms of drawing firm conclusions. The 20 sports and activities which generated the most responses are listed in Figure 1 along with the proportion of responses from voluntary clubs for each activity, a key statistic which explains how sports are delivered, and by whom.

Figure 1 - Responses by Sport

Rank	Sport / Activity	Responses		Voluntary Clubs	
		n	%	n	%
1	Exercise / Fitness	136	10%	73	54%
2	Table Tennis	129	9%	101	78%
3	Bowls	121	9%	94	78%
4	Tennis	121	9%	100	83%

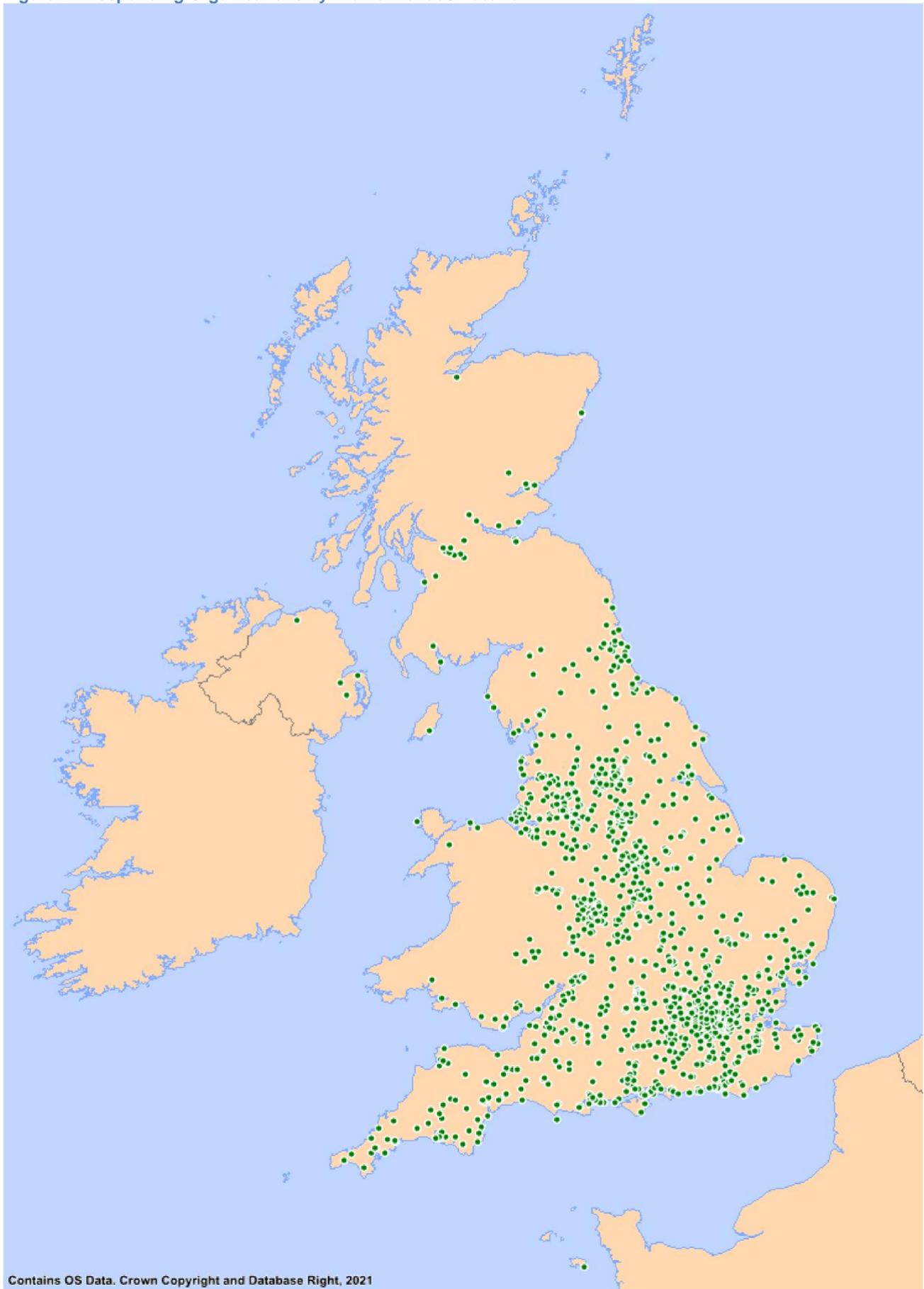
5	Badminton	99	7%	73	74%
6	Squash	96	7%	79	82%
7	Cycling	91	6%	77	85%
8	Football (Soccer)	88	6%	52	59%
9	Gymnastics	88	6%	41	47%
10	Archery	82	6%	70	85%
11	Swimming	81	6%	59	73%
12	Dance	72	5%	13	18%
13	Cricket	68	5%	51	75%
14	Disability Sport	65	5%	37	57%
15	Racquetball	51	4%	44	86%
16	Fencing	50	4%	40	80%
17	Hockey	45	3%	36	80%
18	Athletics	43	3%	23	53%
19	Boxing	40	3%	29	73%
20	Taekwondo	40	3%	18	45%
	Other Sports	786	56%	454	58%
	Total	1,406	100%	1,074	77%

A higher percentage of voluntary clubs indicates that private companies and individuals are less involved in the delivery of an activity, and vice versa. The low proportion of voluntary clubs providing Exercise / Fitness (54%), Dance (18%), Gymnastics (47%) and Taekwondo (45%) suggests that most activity is delivered by paid coaches and tutors. This gives an initial indication of how sports are likely to have been affected by lockdown. All but 55 (4%) of the responses to the survey came from organisations based in England (see Figure 2 below), making the findings relevant primarily to the English context, though there are lessons to be learned for providers throughout the United Kingdom.

Key Points

- Out of a sample of 1,406, 26 sports generated 30 or more responses. Exercise / Fitness, Table Tennis and Bowls were the best represented sports and activities.
- There are notable variations in the proportion of organisations which are voluntary clubs. This has a material impact on how sports are affected by the pandemic.
- The majority of responses came from clubs located in England, with a small minority from the other home nations of the UK.

Figure 2 - Responding Organisations by 'Home' Venue / Location



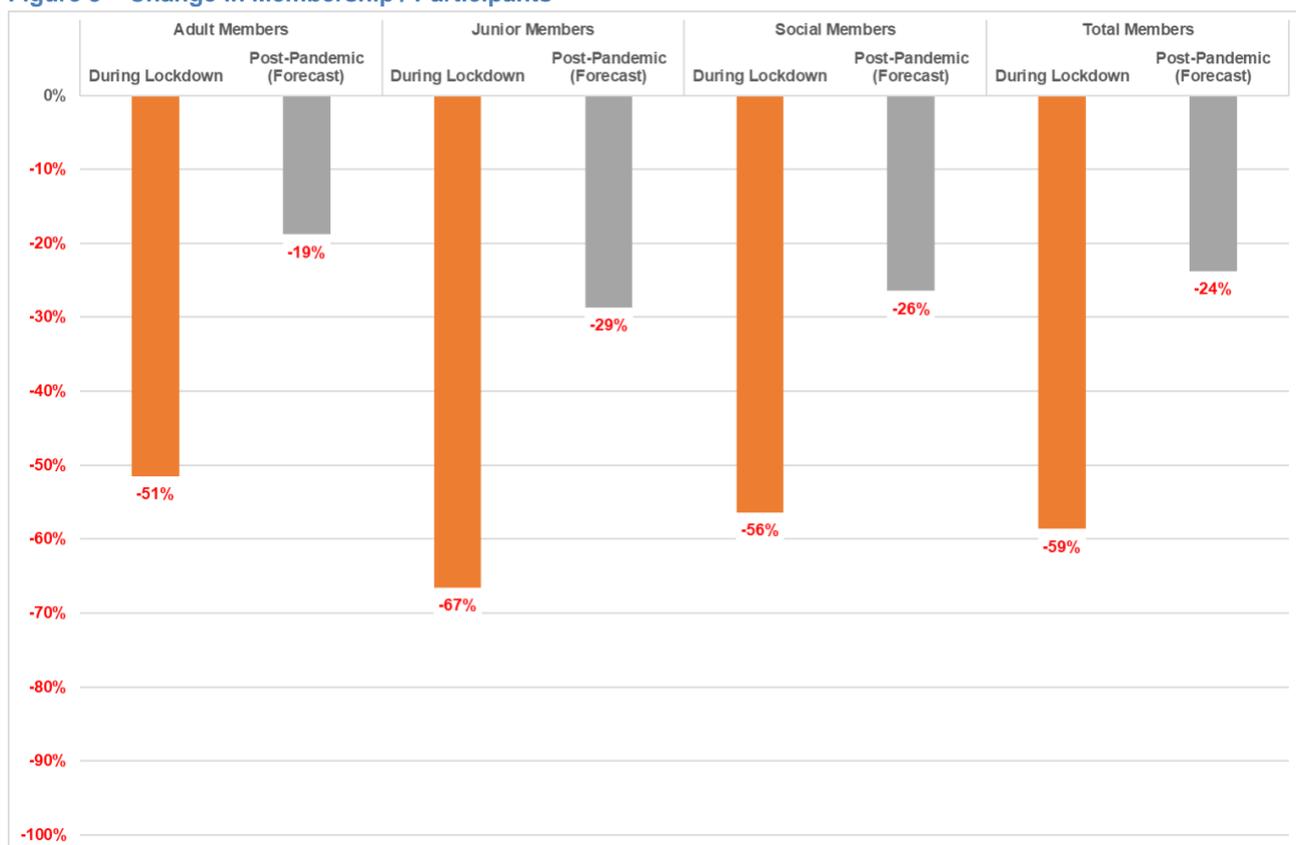
3.2. Impact on Membership / Participants

3.2.1. Membership (or equivalent)

The survey asked respondents to outline the impact of the pandemic on the number of members or participants affiliated with their organisation and to forecast the extent to which they could be expected to return. For the purposes of this report 'membership' refers to both 'members' and the equivalent for organisations that do not collect memberships.

As figure 3 outlines, respondents reported that their total membership fell by an average of almost 60% during lockdown, with a larger impact on junior membership (67%) vs adult membership (51%). Overall, memberships are projected to return to 75% of pre-lockdown levels, though junior members are thought to be less likely to return.

Figure 3 – Change in Membership / Participants



The impacts of the pandemic and the predicted rate of return varied depending on a number of organisational characteristics. Voluntary clubs forecast that 86% of their members will renew their affiliation once restrictions on activities are removed, but for private companies the equivalent figure was 70%, while sole traders were more pessimistic, predicting that only 65% of members would return.

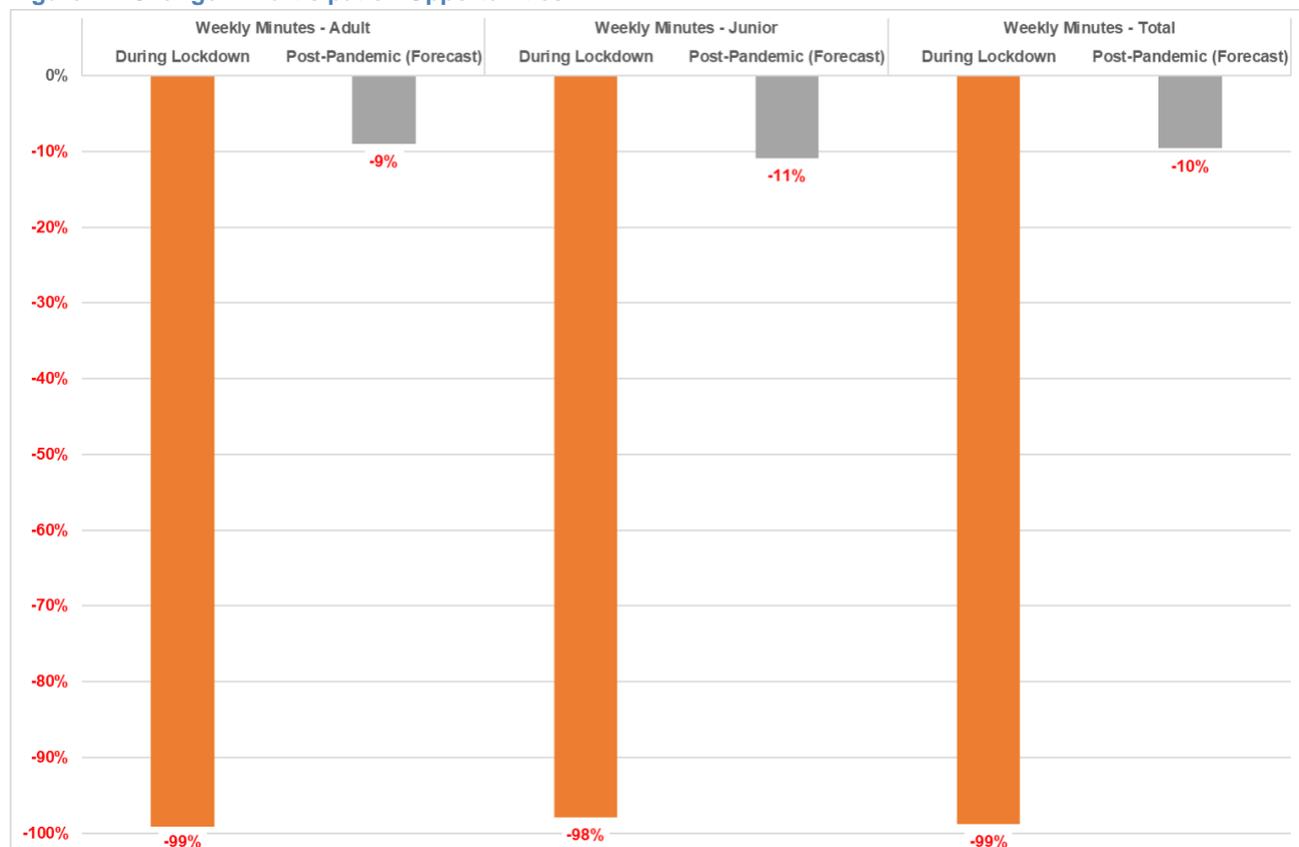
Other organisations that projected a lower rate of return among their membership included those using facilities on a casual basis (68%) and those with an ethnically diverse membership (69%). The individual sports that forecast notably lower than average membership recovery included Disability Sports (53%), Badminton (62%) and Exercise / Fitness (63%). It is important to note however, that these forecasts relate to the period immediately after the removal of all restrictions. The long-term effects on memberships and affiliations are harder to gauge at this juncture and will require careful monitoring for some time post-pandemic.

3.2.2. Participation Opportunities

Participation opportunities were measured through the 'active opportunity minutes' metric outlined above in section 2 ('Our Approach'). This will be referred to as 'participation' in the following section.

Participation fell 99% during lockdown restrictions compared with pre-lockdown levels as activities were curtailed by facility closures and restrictions on individuals' time spent outside the home. However, Figure 4 illustrates the prediction that participation opportunities will bounce back immediately to around 90% of pre-pandemic levels for both adult and junior participants. This is a particularly encouraging finding, since it suggests that the majority of providers' capacity will be retained as the country emerges from lockdown, though companies and professional individuals delivering activities believe that they are likely to see a 58% reduction in opportunities.

Figure 4 – Change in Participation Opportunities



Once again, the impacts vary according to key characteristics. Organisations forecasting higher than average losses of participation opportunities include those which own their playing, training, or social facility (33%) and those using facilities on a casual / PAYP basis (30%). In contrast, organisations using public space predict they will provide **more** opportunities once lockdown restrictions are removed, with a 6% increase forecast. There is some evidence of a deprivation-related gradient with the predicted falls in post-pandemic participation opportunities in the most deprived areas of the country (48%) compared with the least deprived (2%).

Among individual activities Cricket saw the least disruption during lockdown, providing 25% of pre-pandemic opportunities, a finding explained by the timing of the season. The activities with the lowest projected 'return-to-play' levels include Archery (44%), Dance (50%) and Gymnastics (61%). In each case, it is adult participation opportunities which are expected to suffer the largest fall (a 70% fall in adult opportunities is predicted in Dance for example, compared with 37% for Juniors participating in the same activity).

When considered together, these findings suggest that there may be a loosening in the relationship between membership and participation. Organisations believe that they will be able to supply active opportunities at, or close to, their pre-pandemic operating capacity soon after restrictions are removed. However, they are less confident that their members and participants will return to exploit this availability. It is possible that this finding reflects broader trends in participation towards individual activities which fit in around individuals' daily lifestyles rather than a pandemic effect.

Key Points

- Organisations responding to the survey lost an average of 60% of the members and participants during lockdown but expect to recover to 75% of pre-pandemic levels once restrictions are removed.
- Virtually all participation opportunities organised by community sport providers ceased during lockdown. Clubs and other providers expect to be able to deliver 90% of their pre-pandemic participation opportunities once lockdown restrictions end.

3.3 Impact on the Workforce

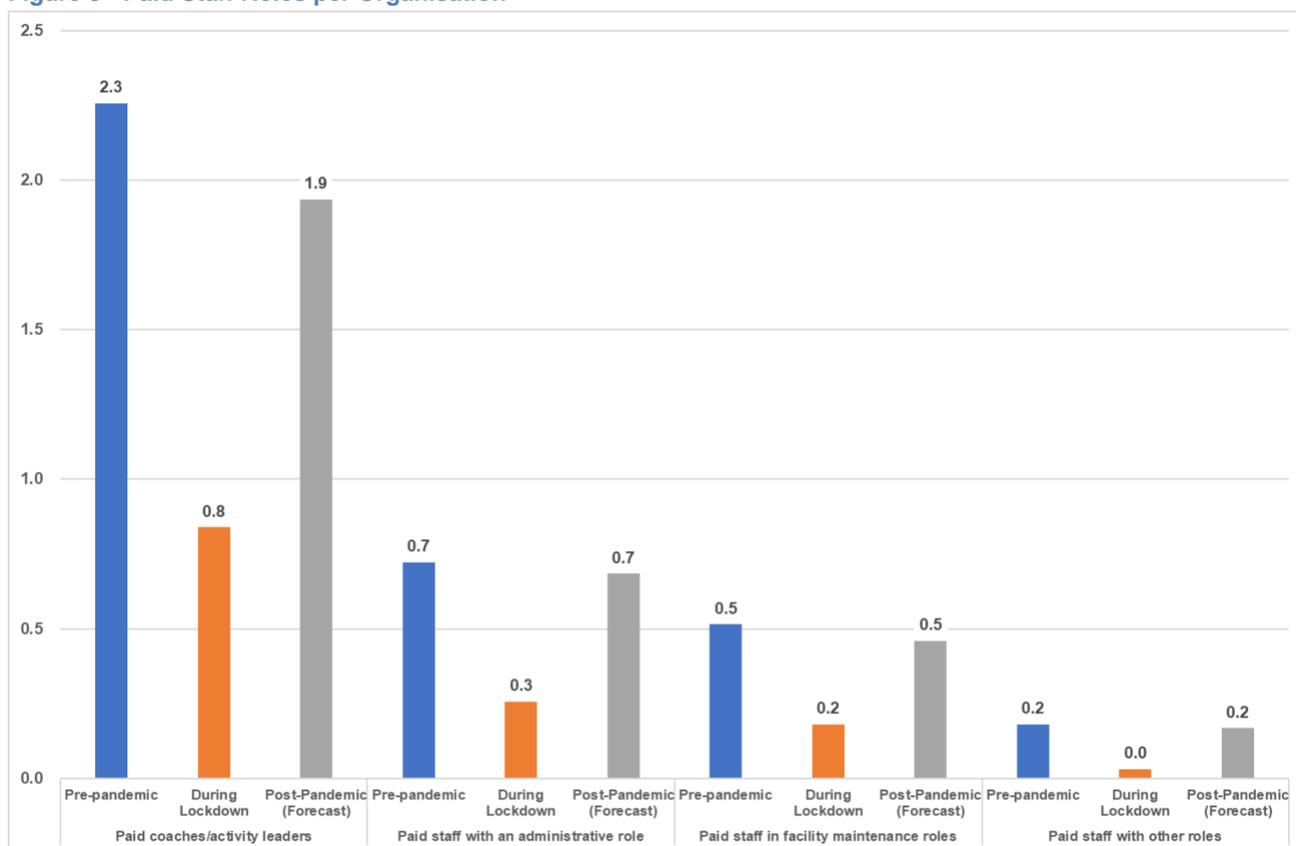
3.3.1. Paid Staff

The importance of coaching as a professional activity, even among voluntary organisations providing community sport, is underlined by the balance between paid roles revealed in Figure 5.

Paid coaches were and remain the largest cohort of paid staff among the organisations responding to the survey. It was also this sector of the workforce that suffered the most significant fall in numbers, dropping by 63% during the pandemic and projected to return at lower levels after lockdown eases (86% of pre-pandemic coaching staff).

In other areas, the paid workforce is predicted to return almost to pre-lockdown levels with marginal losses among administrative staff (5%) and staff in 'other' roles (7%).

Figure 5 - Paid Staff Roles per Organisation



Asset-owning and asset-leasing organisations are projecting slightly higher than average post-pandemic losses of paid coaching staff of 17% (compared to the 14% average). Similarly, organisations with very ethnically diverse memberships forecast that there will be a 25% fall in the number of paid coaching staff once activity begins again after lockdown.

Activities projecting the most significant decreases in the number of paid coaching staff include Archery (45%), Athletics (38%) and Boxing (43%). Organisations offering Canoeing and Kayaking believe they will lose up to 25% of the paid staff in administrative roles, a substantial difference when compared to the 5% average across all activities.

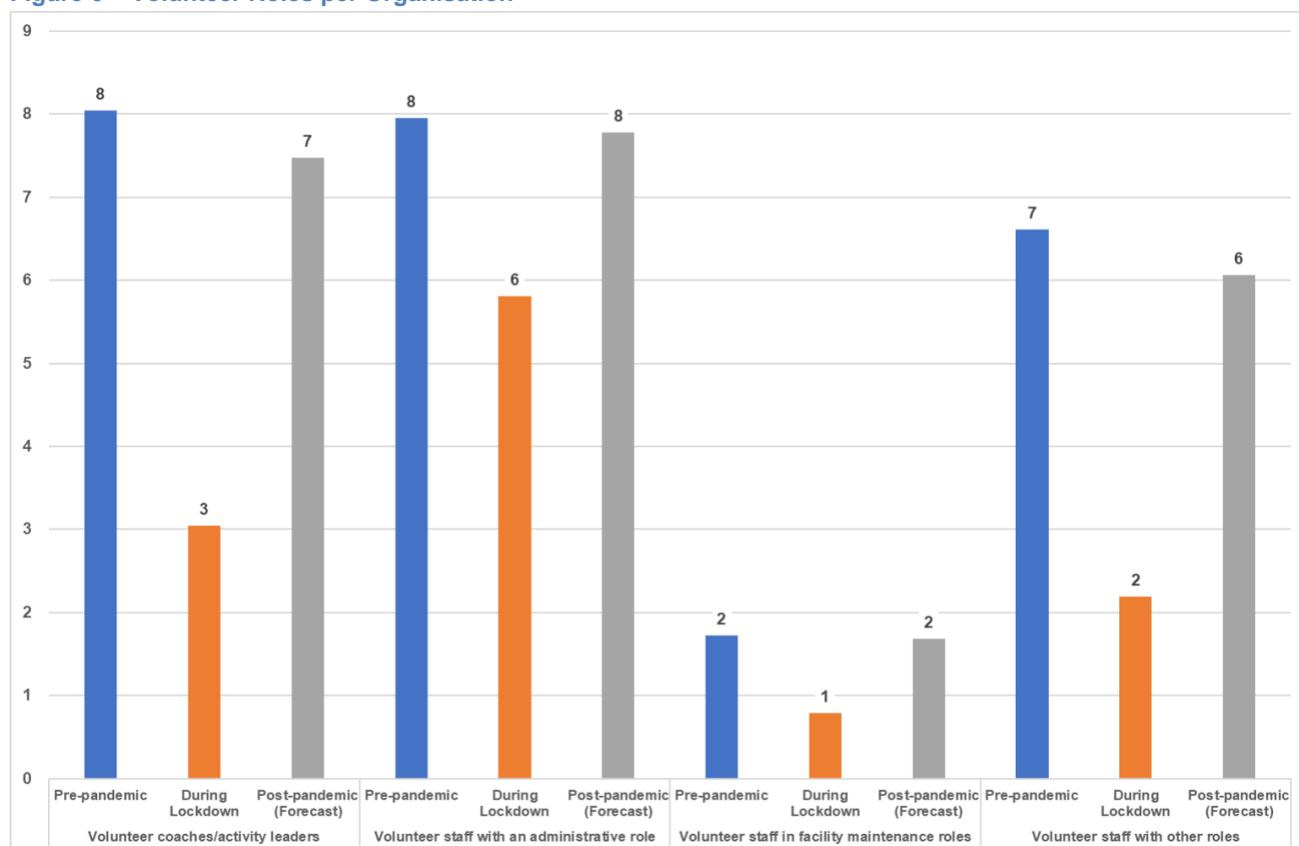
The prediction of a loss of professional coaching capacity goes some way towards explaining the forecast decline in both memberships and participation opportunities after the lockdown restrictions are removed. Any perception of a decline in the quantity or quality of coaching or tutoring available is likely to have a negative impact on returning members. This is all the more marked in activities such as Dance or Gymnastics where paid tuition is the norm and emphasises the importance of paid coaches in the ecosystem of community provision.

3.3.2. Volunteer Roles

Given the high proportion of voluntary clubs in the sample, it is perhaps unsurprising that organisations responding to the survey have far more volunteers in most roles than paid staff.

Figure 6 shows that even among coaches, volunteers outnumbered paid staff (compare with Figure 5), at all stages of the pandemic. While there was a notable reduction in coaching roles, volunteers are predicted to return once lockdown restrictions are eased, with only a 7% fall in the number of roles forecast. More significantly, volunteers in administrative and facility maintenance roles appear to have ‘stayed at the wheel’ to some extent during lockdown, with only one in four administrators inactive during the pandemic, and 98% predicted to return.

Figure 6 – Volunteer Roles per Organisation



Encouragingly, voluntary clubs experienced lower than average losses of volunteers during lockdown and forecast lower losses in the post-pandemic period than other organisation types, which suggests that they are well-placed to begin the process of recovery. Overall, voluntary clubs expect to lose only 4% of their overall volunteer workforce, compared with 13% for companies and paid individuals.

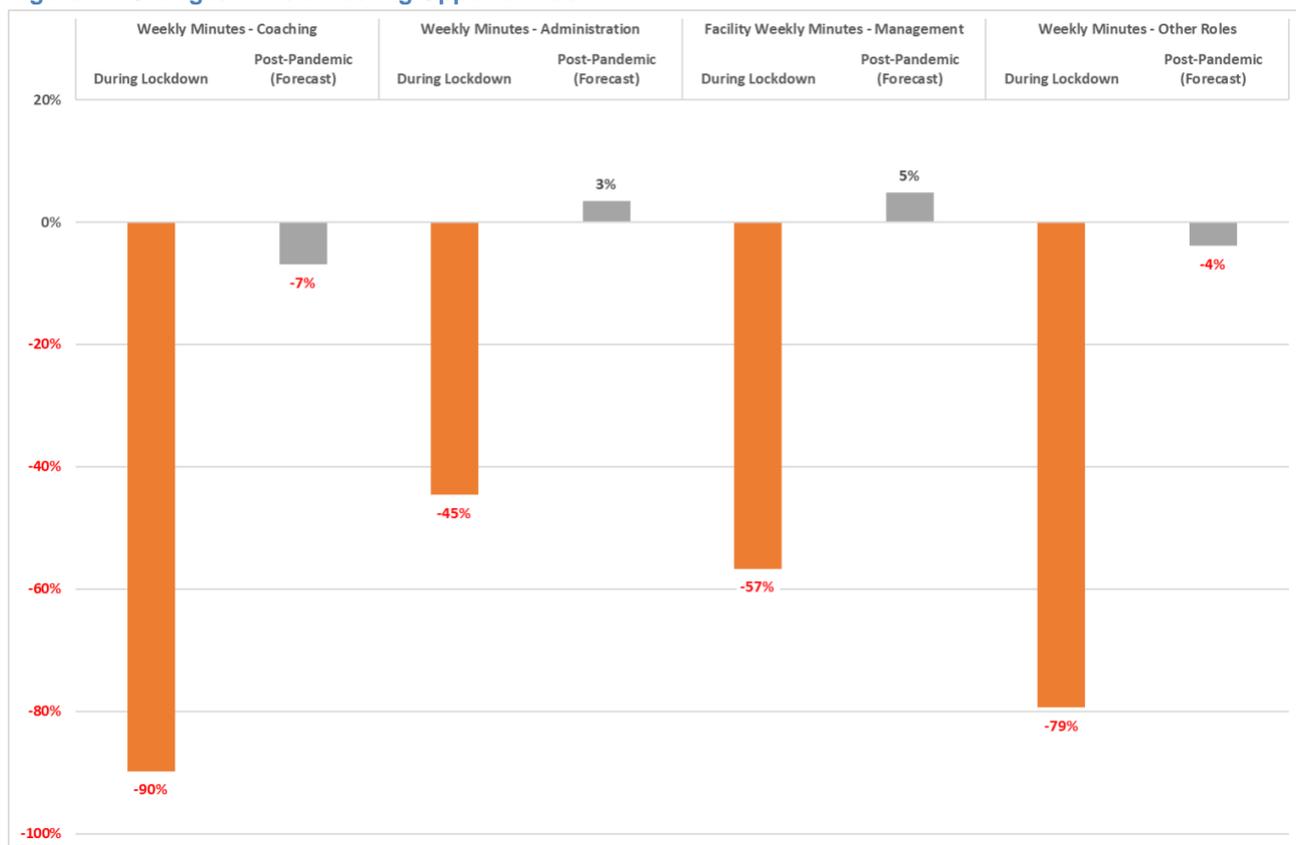
Forecasts of a reduction in the number of volunteers at other categories of organisation appear to be specific to the type of organisation and the roles in question. For example, organisations using public space are predicting higher than average falls in the number of volunteers in some roles (only 2% of coaches and administrators, but 32% of those in facility management roles and 16% of those in ‘other’ roles). Organisations with more ethnically diverse memberships (i.e., those with more than 25% of members and participants from ethnic backgrounds other than ‘White British’) reported that they expect to lose 13% of volunteer coaches and 14% of volunteers in other roles compared to the overall average figures of 2% and 8% respectively.

Generally, these figures paint a positive picture of a volunteer workforce which is poised to deliver on behalf of their organisations after a period during which they have adapted quickly to changing circumstances. Indeed, many have taken the opportunity to reflect on and renew their commitment to their organisations and there appears to be some determination to get ‘back to business’.

3.3.3. Volunteering Opportunities

The number of volunteers fell during the lockdown and is predicted to return to pre-pandemic levels, and this is reflected in a significant reduction in **volunteering opportunity minutes** (see ‘Our Approach’ above) with a forecast of recovery to come (Figure 7). The biggest fall was in coaching (down by 90%), mirroring almost precisely the loss of participation opportunities. In contrast, volunteering opportunities in administrative and facility management roles though down by half, reflected the continued input of volunteers in these roles during the pandemic.

Figure 7 – Changes in Volunteering Opportunities



As an indicator of intended volunteering activity, Figure 7 suggests that the post-pandemic rebound will be strongest in administrative and facility management, where volunteering opportunities are expected to slightly exceed pre-pandemic levels. Nevertheless, this apparent increase in the time spent volunteering, to be delivered by marginally fewer volunteers, suggests that the existing personnel will be placed under additional strain in an effort to secure the recovery. Meanwhile, the predicted fall in volunteer coaching opportunities may be explained by restrictions on the availability of facilities, such as delays in reopening, or capacity limits on indoor facilities.

The likelihood is that organisations are anticipating the extra effort required to restart activities immediately after lockdown, but this is unlikely to translate into a sustained increase in volunteering activity over the longer term. As with participation, organisations’ forecasts of recovery relate to the period immediately following the lifting of lockdown restrictions, and it is not possible to predict the extent to which volunteering levels will eventually return to the pre-pandemic position. The key and common factors limiting an organisation’s return to play are discussed in section 3.5 of this report (below).

Key Points

- Coaches were the hardest hit group among paid staff working for community sport providers, some are believed to have left the sector during the pandemic and are not expected to return.
- There was a significant reduction of volunteering activity, but many administrative and facility maintenance volunteers continued to fulfil their roles during the pandemic.
- Organisations predict that volunteering activity will return to or exceed pre-pandemic levels, at least in the short-term. While this offers encouragement that recovery will be swift, a projected decline in the number of volunteers at an organisation's disposal means that there are some signs existing volunteers will be under more strain.

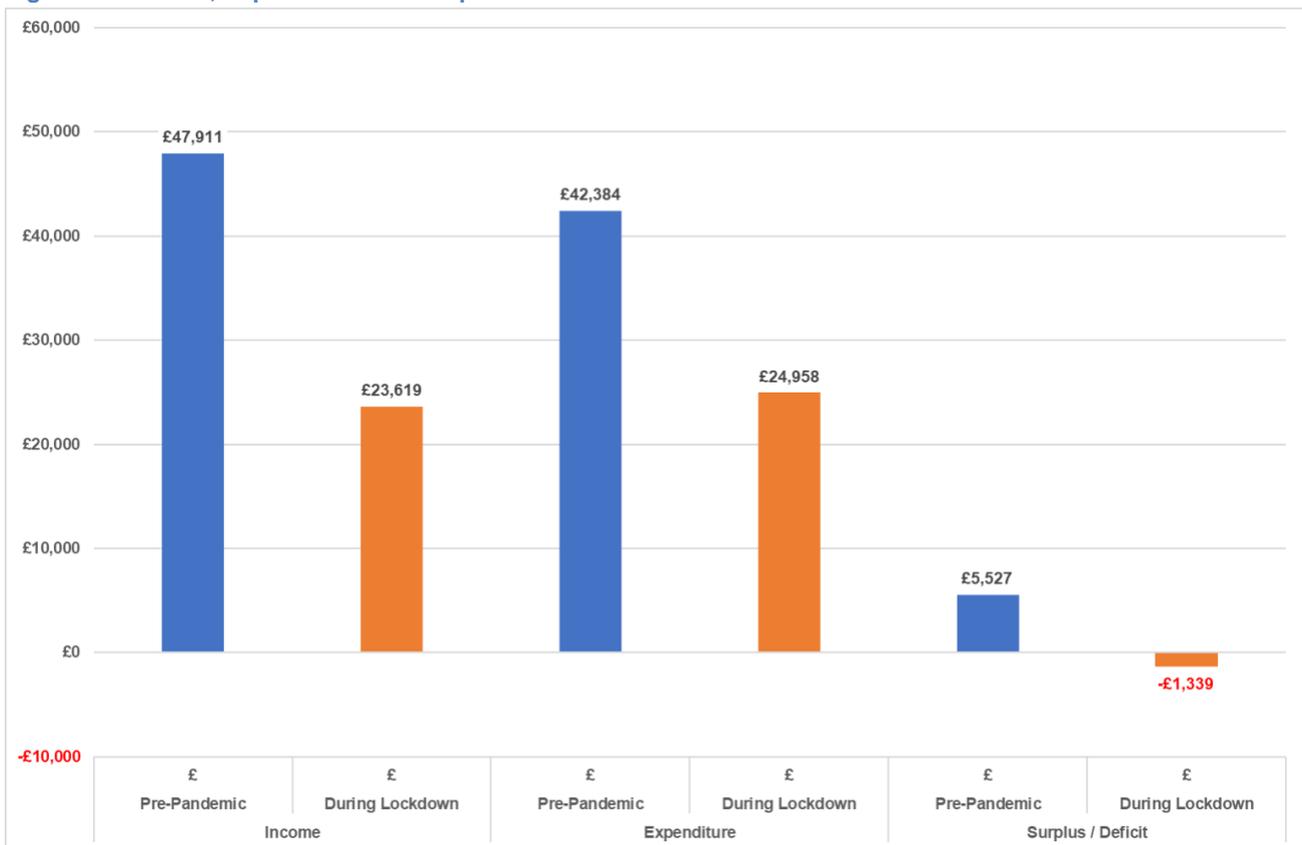
3.4. Impact on Finances

3.4.1. Income and Expenditure

The financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been serious, though generally not severe.

Respondents reported that income and expenditure have both fallen significantly when compared to pre-lockdown operations. The rate of these falls is not symmetrical however, with income falling faster (51% below pre-lockdown levels) than expenditure (41%). In the course of a year, a position of prudent financial management has been eroded by the lack of income generating activities, while organisations with fixed costs have been forced to continue to spend. Average operating margins fell from a surplus £5,500 to a deficit of £1,300, though this is thought to be a temporary reversal.

Figure 8 – Income, Expenditure and Surplus / Deficit



The financial impacts of the pandemic on companies and paid individuals are more severe than on other types of provider, with a steeper fall in income (66% vs 51%), only partially offset by a faster decline in expenditure (48% vs 41%). Accordingly, average profits in excess of £21,000 before the pandemic were followed by an average trading loss of almost £27,000. In contrast, voluntary clubs, which generally operate at a smaller financial scale, have experienced a smaller reversal, with an average pre-pandemic surplus of £3,000 declining to a deficit of £1,300 during lockdown (a net change of -£4,300).

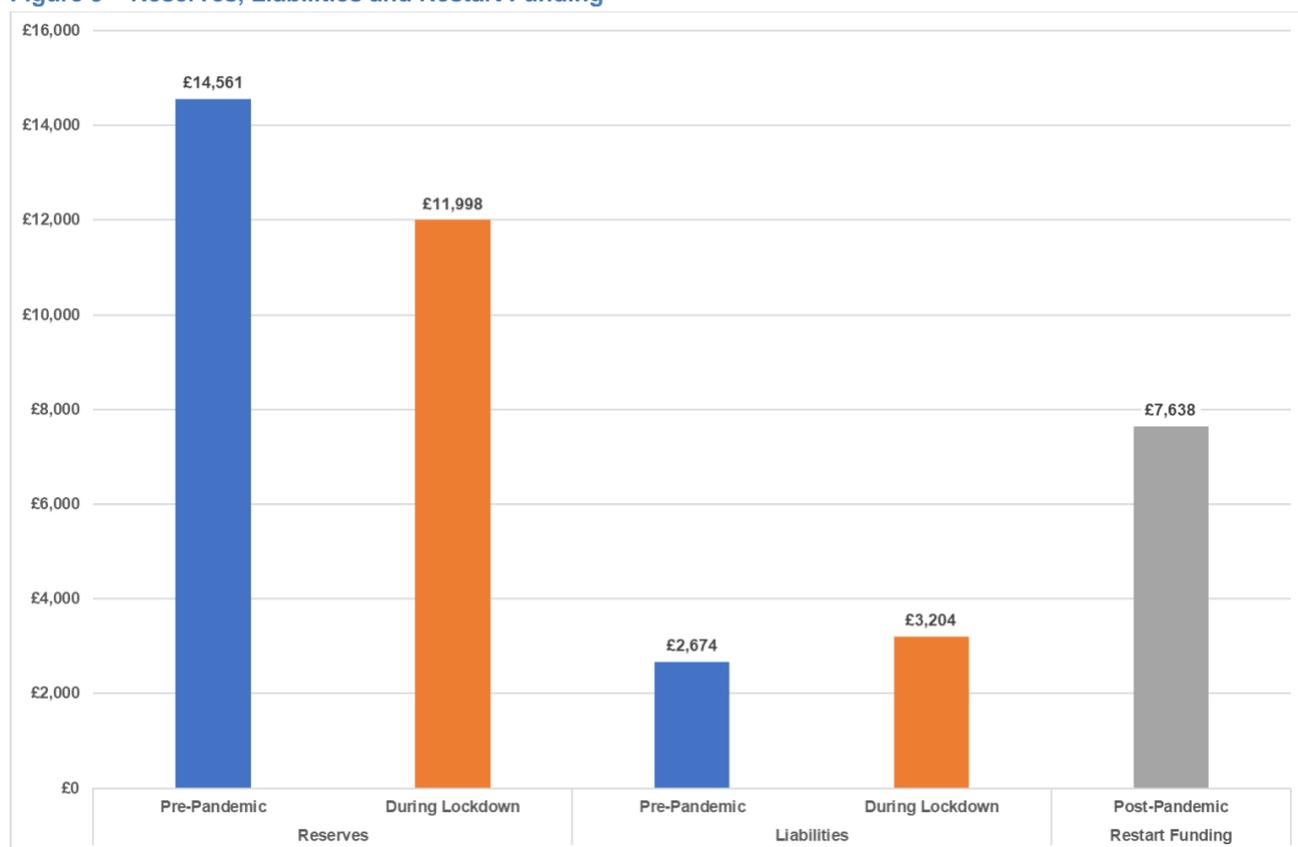
Asset-owning organisations have seen the biggest swing from profit (£8,900) to loss (-£5,600) during the pandemic, due to the fixed costs of facility maintenance. ‘Footloose’ providers (those not tied to a fixed location) were still operating at a surplus during lockdown (£4,100 for nomadic organisations and £1,700 for those using public space).

In absolute terms, organisations providing Dance and Gymnastics were among the hardest hit in terms of financial reversal, with an average £30,000 swing from surplus to deficit during the pandemic, primarily from the loss of tuition and coaching fees. Rugby Union providers saw a similar decline over the period, though this resulted primarily from a loss of bar and catering income. Organisations with an ethnically diverse membership also saw a much more significant financial turnaround (of c.£21,000 over the year) than those with predominantly white membership, which (in comparison) made only a marginal loss during the pandemic.

3.4.2. Reserves and Liabilities

Just under a third of the clubs and other organisations responding to the survey (32%) operate without any financial cushion in the form of cash held in reserve, though these organisations tend to be smaller in scale. In contrast, larger scale organisations are much more likely to have a financial buffer against periods of reduced income, though these have come under significant pressure during the pandemic. Of those organisations with financial reserves, 45% reported that these had been used to underwrite financial losses, resulting in a decline of c.£2,500 (18%) over the course of the year, while 31% of organisations with financial liabilities said that they had increased during the same period, by around £500 on average (20%).

Figure 9 – Reserves, Liabilities and Restart Funding



Reserves held by companies and paid individuals responding to the survey fell by 45% and sole traders saw reserves fall by 26%, whereas for voluntary clubs the reduction was lower than average at 14%.

Providers that leased their facilities saw reserves fall by 27% during lockdown, which may be the result of the need to maintain the leasing arrangement during a period of little or no income. Notably, these providers had the largest financial reserves of all (in terms of facility tenure) prior to the onset of the pandemic (c.£33,500), and this was still the case after a year of relative inactivity (c.£24,600).

In contrast, the effect on organisations using public space was much smaller, with only a 5% fall in reserves, though these providers tended to operate on lower budgets.

While liabilities increased by a fifth over the year, they are generally small in relation to overall expenditure levels, and even after the pandemic most providers retained sufficient financial reserves to be able to meet these costs. The additional liabilities frequently related to measures taken to mitigate financial impacts such as temporary rental arrangements, business rates and VAT deferrals and supplier agreements.

Organisations were asked whether they required additional financial support to restart activity after the pandemic, and among those who advocated restart funding the average figure suggested was £7,600, or 16% of pre-pandemic income. While this is likely to be enough to accelerate the re-establishment of operations after the pandemic, 44% of organisations reported that they did not require any such funding. In addition, while additional funding would support some providers in the period immediately after lockdown restrictions were removed, the long-term financial impact on the organisations in the survey is impossible to forecast.

3.4.3. Financial Viability / Going Concerns

The financial impact of the pandemic extends beyond a simple account of profit and loss. As providers have been forced to draw on their reserves and defer liabilities, so organisations are less secure. As a benchmark of financial resilience, this study has used a measure that the reserves an organisation holds should be equivalent to one third of their annual turnover, giving at least three to four months of financial security. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, the typical ratio of reserves as a percentage of annual income for community sport providers was 30%, but the combined effects of income loss and continued costs have reduced this to 25%. While voluntary clubs continue to operate with healthy reserves (36% of pre-pandemic annual income on average), companies and paid individuals are in much more precarious positions, with an average buffer of only 4% of income. In both cases however, the ratio fell by several percentage points over the course of the year.

Once again, the impact of the pandemic manifests itself in different ways. For example, organisations with more ethnically diverse communities, already operating with low reserves (average pre-pandemic reserves at 17% of annual income) experienced a further decline to 10% of annual income, suggesting that they will be under additional stress as the restart begins.

In terms of specific activities that have the highest ratio of reserves to (pre-pandemic) income and thereby suggesting a degree of financial security which leaves them well set to begin the recovery include organisations delivering Bowls (35%), Cycling (66%), Fencing (42%) and Snow Sports (33%). Meanwhile, Racquetball and Tennis providers have dropped marginally below the threshold on average. The issue of reserves and liabilities is less significant for organisations with no responsibility to maintain facilities, which gives them a rare advantage over asset-owning entities.

The overall financial effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions are quite clear, with significant reductions of revenue only partially offset by falls in expenditure, requiring many organisations to use their cash reserves to bridge the funding gap. The ability of organisations to generate income will be dependent on the timing and speed of reopening. If restart can happen reasonably quickly, providers can return to surplus in time to stabilise reserves and reduce liabilities. The key factor is the ability to generate income from operations, which most do at a small profit. Nevertheless, if the recovery from lockdown is slow and prolonged, organisations may not be at full capacity for some time under continuing restrictions. Under these circumstances, further financial assistance may be necessary to prevent a permanent loss of organisational capacity.

Key Points

- Organisational expenditure has fell significantly during the pandemic, but income declined at a faster rate. Organisations which were operating at a modest annual surplus incurred a small deficit during lockdown.

- Around one in three providers operates without any financial cushion. Those providers with cash reserves saw them decline by 18%, while liabilities increased by an average of 20%.
- The impact of the lockdown on providers' financial viability, while broadly negative, may be reversed if organisations are able to return to delivering income generating activities at the earliest opportunity.

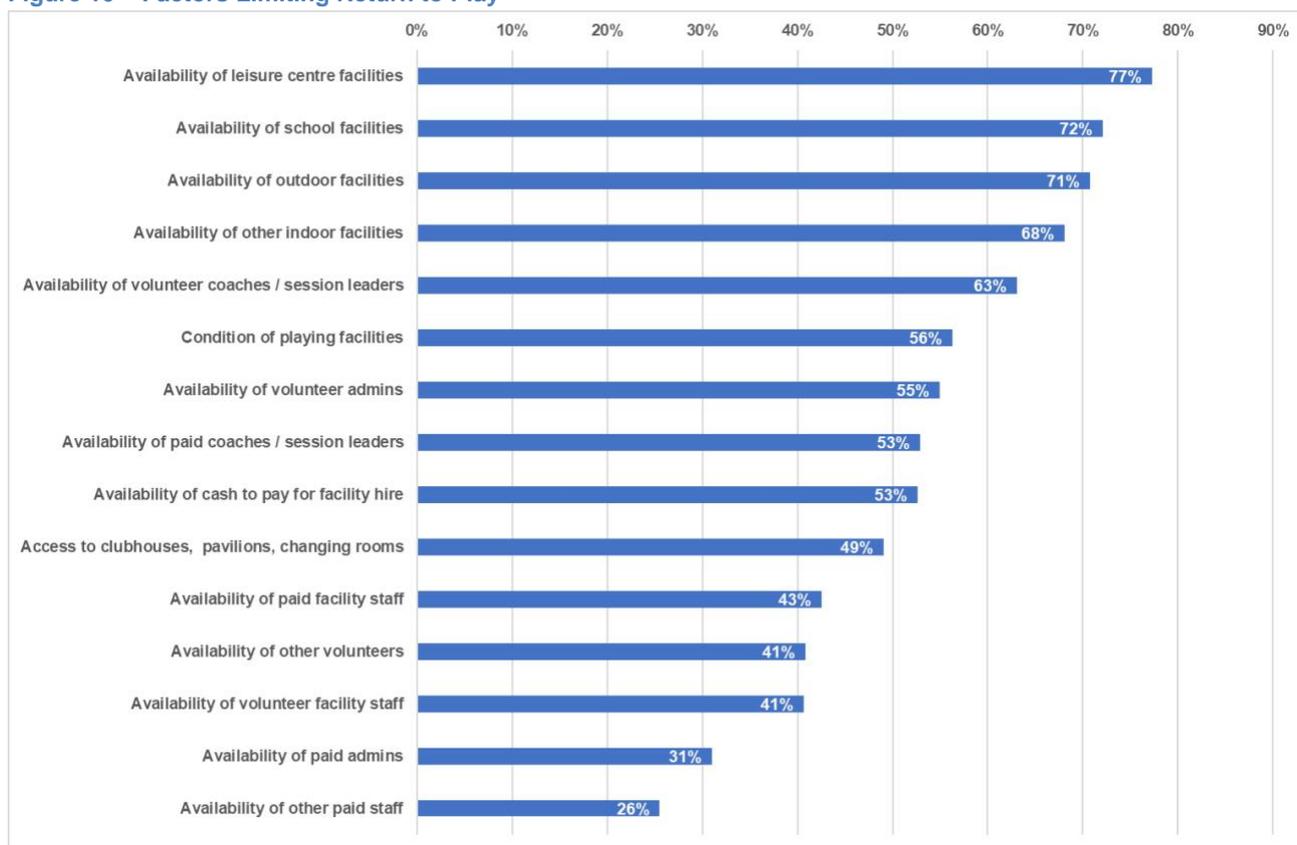
3.5. Issues Constraining the Return to Action

3.5.1. Limiting Factors

In general terms, providers anticipate that the major constraints on the return to play will be the availability of facilities and volunteers (Figure 10). More than three quarters of organisations (77%) agree that the availability of leisure centre facilities could limit their ability to provide activities, while 72% highlight the (limited) availability of school facilities.

The availability of facilities is also considered to be crucial for the clubs that are dependent on them for the delivery of their activities (e.g., halls and pools). The nature of facility tenure is a key driver of this data with organisations accessing facilities on a casual basis anticipating the greatest constraints on their activity, and those that use open spaces or public spaces constrained only by the availability of outdoor facilities. Conversely, facility availability is less of an issue for asset-owning or leasing organisations (which have more control over access), and those using public space. These anxieties reflect an ongoing concern among voluntary clubs in sports which use leisure centres and school sites (e.g., Badminton and Volleyball), which underlines the dependency of voluntary clubs on publicly owned facilities pitches, halls, and pools.

Figure 10 – Factors Limiting Return to Play



Volunteer capacity is the other key concern of the organisations responding to the survey, relating primarily to the availability of coaches and session leaders (63%), whilst there is some additional nervousness that paid coaches will be unavailable (53% of organisations). Interestingly, facility tenure appears to have some influence over the extent to which providers see coach availability as a major concern. Organisations using public space are less concerned by the availability of paid coaches, possibly because their activities are less formal and therefore less dependent on formal coach input. For asset-owning organisations, access to clubhouses and pavilions is also a significant issue (66%), emphasising the importance of income from bar and catering sales to their continued financial viability.

3.5.2. Mitigation Measures

Providers have attempted to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in various ways, with limited success. More than half (55%) reduced their expenditure in line with lower levels of activity, and 37% were able to persuade members to continue paying their subscription fees, but a similar proportion of clubs suspended their fees entirely for the duration of the lockdown, while 17% refunded them altogether. Asset-owning (42%) and leasing organisations (27%) were less likely to have reduced expenditure because they have continued to spend on maintaining their facilities (which indicates they will be ready for use when required, but also highlights the costs involved).

Organisations in more deprived areas were half as likely to have persuaded members to continue to pay their subscription fees (22% vs 37%) as those in less deprived neighbourhoods (44%). Similarly, organisations with a more ethnically diverse membership were half as likely to have continued collecting fees from their members (20%) as those with predominantly White British subscription bases (40%). This is likely to be due to reduced income among members, forcing them to prioritise other household expenditure ahead of sport and physical activity.

New (alternative) funding sources are few and far between. Few clubs have been able to diversify their income streams, and those that have done so have achieved only marginal success in general. It is particularly hard for providers to diversify activities, especially in team sports, which cannot take place online. Those that do, are providing individual activities related to their sport, often aimed at maintaining fitness. Providers in individual, tuition-led activities such as Taekwondo (54%), Gymnastics (31%) and Exercise / Fitness (28%) have been more successful in identifying and exploiting new opportunities for delivering activity, but only to a limited extent.

3.5.3. Post-Lockdown Impacts

The return to activity will take time, and the pandemic will leave its mark on community sport providers.

Three-quarters of all providers believe that the return to full activity will take many months, and 65% agree that the effects of the lockdown will leave permanent scars on their organisation. Voluntary clubs, and community organisations are more optimistic than companies, paid individuals, and sole traders however, possibly because of their confidence in the return of their workforce. Similarly, organisations using open spaces, being less dependent on access to facilities and volunteers, are relatively unconcerned by the prospect of re-engaging in activity.

One significant area of concern is that organisations with more than 25% of members from ethnically diverse communities are forecasting consistently negative post-lockdown impacts. These providers report a higher rate of 'scarring' (78%), longer recovery time (80%) and lower likelihood that they will offer the same range of activities after the pandemic (66%) than organisations with predominantly white memberships.

In terms of individual activities that are showing greater levels of concern at prospects for recovery organisations providing Taekwondo (85%), Boxing (92%), Gymnastics (92%), Rugby Union (96%) were the most consistently pessimistic. In contrast, Cycling (60%) and Tennis (57%) were more optimistic. One note of caution must be sounded here however, in that organisations were asked to

predict the post-lockdown impacts without knowing when restrictions would end or at what rate they would be lifted.

3.5.4. Predicted Outcomes

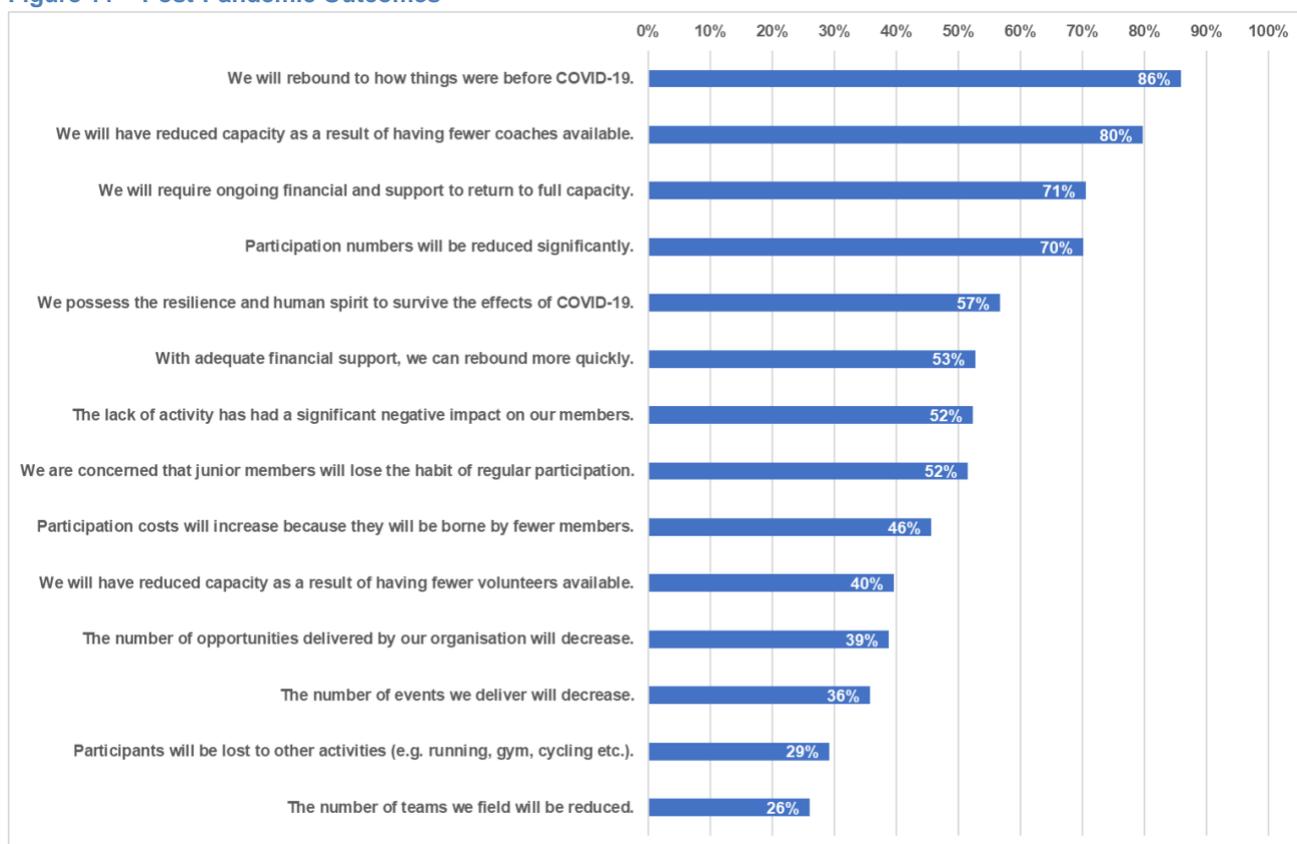
There is a strong sense of enthusiasm and eagerness to engage in the post-pandemic recovery process among the organisations responding to the survey (see Figure 11 below).

A significant majority (86%) believe that they will rebound to a pre-Covid position in time, though 80% feel that they will be impaired by a loss of coaching capacity.

Despite the apparent financial prudence highlighted above, some 71% of providers believe that they will require ongoing support to return to full capacity, while 53% agree that rebound could be accelerated if financial help were made available.

Most significantly, 70% of providers believe that there will be a significant reduction in participant numbers, and 26% forecast that they will field fewer teams in competition.

Figure 11 – Post-Pandemic Outcomes



Facility tenure appears to play some part in influencing providers' sense of optimism about returning to activity. Organisations using public space for their activities are notably more optimistic about post-lockdown outcomes than providers based at fixed locations, with facility-renting organisations expressing a markedly higher level of anxiety. This underlines the importance of maintaining a stable relationship with facility operators for those organisations that do not own or lease their home venue.

There is notable confidence in the capacity and resilience of organisations of every type, but it is also clear that inactivity has had a negative impact on participants, with just over half of all providers agreeing that this is a significant issue. The most commonly highlighted impact of lockdown that respondents identified was the mental health burden on their participants and volunteers, driven principally by the removal of socialisation opportunities as well as 'loneliness', 'isolation', 'boredom' and 'frustration'.

For private companies and paid individuals, the return to activity will be contingent upon a number of risk factors which are less evident in other organisations. Only 40% felt that they had sufficient resilience to survive the effects of the pandemic, compared with 60% of voluntary clubs, while 89% believed that they would need ongoing financial support to return to full capacity (compared to 68% of voluntary clubs). Interestingly, private companies felt that additional investment would accelerate recovery (60%) more than voluntary clubs (52%) but are more anxious that junior participants will lose the participation habit. As many as 70% of private providers agreed that this was likely to hamper their recovery, compared with 50% of voluntary clubs, while nearly two thirds (64%) said that they expected to have reduced capacity as a result of lower availability among volunteers.

As lockdown restrictions come to an end, most community sport providers are poised to resume activity with considerable confidence, tinged with understandable anxiety. The key consideration for stakeholders will be to measure how closely the outcomes predicted in this research match the reality of the recovery from the pandemic. Much is dependent on the speed at which lockdown restrictions are removed, whether or not further restrictions on activity can be avoided and the financial and practical support available to providers.

Key Points

- In general terms, providers forecast that the major constraints to the return to play will be the availability of facilities and volunteers, though they are optimistic that volunteers will return.
- In mitigating the impact of lockdown on participants, most providers have reduced expenditure in line with lower levels of activity. Diversification of activities has proved challenging, while new funding opportunities are relatively thin on the ground.
- The full return to pre-pandemic levels of activity may be a long process, and the pandemic will leave its mark on providers for some time to come.
- There is confidence among providers in their capacity and resilience, but inactivity has had a significant impact on participants (particularly on mental health), and some permanent shifts in activity patterns may yet emerge in the post-pandemic landscape.

4. Key Findings

The findings presented in this report coalesce around several key themes which are pertinent to the delivery of all community sport, regardless of the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely:

- Facilities;
- The Volunteer Workforce;
- Resilience;
- Impact Differentials, and;
- Loosening of Club Ties.

In addition, the ongoing return to activity as lockdown restrictions are eased presents a further theme for consideration.

4.1. Facilities: control, capacity, condition

The availability of facilities is fundamental to the entire eco-system of delivery for sport and activity providers and is key to the restart process. The approaches that organisations have taken in response to the effects of the pandemic on their activities have depended to a significant extent on the amount of control that they have over their 'home' venues. Asset-owning providers continued to incur maintenance costs, even as lockdown cut off the supply of income, while organisations which use rented facilities, particularly those on school or leisure centre sites, were effectively forced to go dormant. Meanwhile, providers making use of public space, unburdened by maintenance costs and able in some cases to continue informal activities, have suffered less disruption during lockdown.

As facility tenure determined organisational responses to the pandemic, so it will dictate how providers prepare for and respond to the removal of restrictions on activity. For asset-owning organisations, reopening offers a renewed opportunity to generate the income on which their continued viability depends. Providers which rent their facilities will be dependent on the response of third parties, typically schools, leisure centres and community halls (plus other more specialised facilities) to the easing of restrictions, which may generate conflict where operators' interpretations of the rules differ from one another or from those of users. Restrictions on facility capacity, particularly at indoor facilities, are likely to remain in place for some time, limiting class sizes and constraining income from private tuition. The role of publicly owned facilities has rarely been so important to the delivery of community sport.

4.2. Readiness of the volunteer workforce

One of the most consistent and encouraging findings from this survey is that the workforce of volunteers on which community sport depends is ready, willing, and able to return and deliver pre-pandemic levels of activity as soon as conditions allow. Indeed, a considerable number of volunteers have been continuously active during lockdown, responding to the constantly changing context of lockdowns, tiers, and roadmaps to recovery. This level of commitment should be reassuring to all involved in community sport but should not be taken for granted. The capacity of the volunteer workforce appears to be available to community sport, but it can only be employed *if* facilities are also made available to providers.

Organisations remain vulnerable to the loss of volunteers, especially coaches who are the key group involved in the delivery of activities. While some impact on volunteering capacity is inevitable, the revival of a volunteering 'culture', particularly in the early stage of the pandemic, offers hope that any losses will be temporary. Nevertheless, the survey findings also show that there is a high degree of dependence on paid coaching staff to deliver activities, even at voluntary clubs and community organisations. Any reduction in this part of the workforce, even temporary, will place additional strain on an already stretched volunteers base at a critical time.

4.3. Resilience

The continued engagement of voluntary clubs in the delivery of community sport is proof that they are resilient organisations, and many acted swiftly in response to the pandemic. The findings of the survey

suggest that voluntary providers are well-placed to reactivate their delivery, having had time to rest, reinvigorate, and in some cases reorient their organisations to reflect the changing tastes and preferences of their members. There are some signs that this resilience will be put to the test, at least initially, as clubs return to play.

Many organisations which have operated on principles of financial prudence for many years were able to use the cushion of financial cash reserves to mitigate against the impacts of lockdown on income generation. It should be of some concern therefore that a surprisingly large proportion of providers operate without any cash in reserve, while the buffer available to providers has been depleted by 18% overall. This is especially true of those companies and private individuals who have suffered significantly and whose viability as deliverers would be threatened by any further extension of restrictions on activity, with inevitable consequences for the many voluntary clubs who employ them.

4.4. Impact differentials across different club types.

The nature and scale of the impacts of the pandemic on community sport providers varies considerably according to factors such as facility tenure, location, participant profile, and the sports and activities on offer. Put simply, different organisations have been affected in different ways and for different reasons. For example, sports which are effectively dependent on the availability of specialised facilities have effectively been mothballed for the duration of the lockdown. Without access to indoor pools, artificial grass pitches or ice rinks, Diving, Hockey and Figure Skating cannot take place. In contrast, some 'footloose' sports which can be delivered independently of fixed facilities, such as Road Cycling, Running, Rowing or Outdoor Swimming, have seen renewed interest, as people have attempted to remain active by switching sports.

Similarly, organisations providing specific activities enacted a response to lockdown which was tailored to reflect the typical business model of that sport. The findings of the survey emphasise the contrast between clubs in Rugby Union (where facility ownership is more commonplace), Cycling (which predominantly uses public highways with no direct costs to participants), Boxing (delivered by volunteer coaches at low cost in deprived neighbourhoods) and Gymnastics (where paid coaching is the norm). Restart impacts are therefore likely to vary for similar reasons, rendering a 'one-size-fits-all' approach inappropriate.

4.5. Loosening of club ties?

The links between providers and participants will need to be re-established quickly as pre-Covid activity habits will have to be restarted from scratch. A fundamental but temporary shift in participation patterns may be made permanent if providers are unable to deliver activities, regardless of the cause of the interruption. To some extent, the growth in popularity of individual activities reflects a broader societal shift over recent years which has seen a gradual but continuous decline in club membership, but this trend appears to have accelerated during lockdown.

The implications for formal sports and activities, especially team sports, are serious. Competitive team sports are impossible to replicate online, while individual fitness-based activities may retain a competitive element through the sharing of output data from wearable devices or connected equipment such as exercise bikes or treadmills. Long-term, it is likely that organisations may have to accept the reality of the situation and adapt to it, though it would be unwise to judge the long-term effects of the pandemic on participation patterns until the restrictions on activities have fully unwound.

4.6. Recovery Time

There is clear intent on the part of the organisations featured in this research to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity. While this is encouraging, most providers also recognise that they will be operating under a range of constraints on delivery for some time, not least because some participants are expected to take their time in returning. Volunteer capacity is likely to return quickly but may be diluted if facilities are unavailable. Most providers have been able to withstand the impact of lockdown on

income generation, but plans to replenish reserves and restore financial health are contingent upon a key assumption: that the removal of restrictions on activity is final and permanent.

In the context of these uncertainties, it is perhaps unsurprising that two thirds of organisations responding to the survey believe the pandemic will leave permanent scars. Providers are convinced that they possess the resilience and willpower to overcome the challenges they face, and that they will be able to achieve pre-pandemic levels of delivery. Returning to full capacity will take time however, and will require the combined support of national governing bodies, public agencies and the broad coalition of charities and trusts which advocate on behalf of clubs and other providers in the sector. Financial support will be undoubtedly welcome, but practical support is equally important, beginning with the process of ensuring that publicly owned facilities are made available at the earliest possible opportunity.

It is incumbent upon all organisations which support community sport to monitor the progress of voluntary clubs and other providers with care and candour as recovery from lockdown proceeds. The findings of this survey paint an optimistic picture of the sector in the Spring of 2021. As this report has outlined clearly however, the impacts of the pandemic have varied considerably between organisations according to the facilities they use, the activities they provide and the people whose participation they facilitate. It is therefore to be expected that the impacts of the return to play will be similarly diverse, and there is a strong case for comparing the actual outturn of events with the predictions made here, once the recovery process is complete.

5. Implications of the Key Findings

The survey focusses primarily on voluntary clubs, which are the setting in which around 4 million people regularly take part in sport, though other organisation types, such as private companies and sole traders delivering coaching the 'reach' of the organisational types featured within this study are expected to go far beyond this figure. In 2020, the Sport Industry Research Centre found that,

“for every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity, a return on investment (ROI) of £3.91 was created for individuals and society. Furthermore, the combined economic and social value (SROI) of taking part in community sport and physical activity in England in 2017/2018 was £85.5 billion.”

Social Return on Investment of Sport and Physical Activity in England, Sport England, 2020

Any loss of capacity in the community sport sector might therefore be reasonably expected to have a negative impact on the broad range of economic and social benefits derived from participation in sport and physical activity.

5.1 Physical and Mental Health

Social return on investment from sport and physical activity is partly derived through the preventative and therapeutic benefits to the physical and mental health of an individual, by reducing the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, helping to prevent Type 2 diabetes, or delaying the onset of dementia. The evidence of a reduction of active opportunities delivered by community sport providers (especially those serving deprived communities and ethnically diverse communities) points to a concomitant reduction in the contribution of sport and physical activity toward the suppression of costs associated with physical and mental health conditions. Further, the challenges of reinstating active opportunities identified by this study will limit the contribution of sport and physical activity to reducing these costs in the future, and they will remain below the levels previously recorded until such limitations are fully mitigated or removed.

5.2 Mental Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is measured across two areas: subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction. The study provides strong evidence of member disengagement, physical inactivity, a significant fall in the number of paid members of staff, and a temporary decline in active volunteers during the lockdown.

The responses from the study also suggest that when lockdown restrictions are removed, some individuals are unlikely to return to the activities or roles they once occupied.

Respondents identified mental health implications as being the most prevalent health impact of lockdown amongst their members. While it is likely that this was a temporary decline in mental wellbeing, for some members, participants, volunteers and paid staff the effects will be a long-term or even permanent. The evidence from this study shows that there will be limitations on the ability of organisations to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity, which has implications in terms of increased costs to society and a reduced return on investment for sport and physical activity in this regard.

5.3 Individual Development

Individual development is derived from 'educational attainment' and 'enhanced human capital'. For example, participation in sport and physical activity is believed to support a 1% increase in educational attainments among pupils aged 11-18, while graduates who participate in sport at university earn an average of 5% more per year than their non-sporting counterparts.

This study highlights that junior memberships fell by 67% during lockdown with a projected return at 29% less than pre-pandemic levels. Again, these impacts were more significant in more deprived and ethnically diverse communities where participation opportunities are more heavily dependent on organised delivery. The implication of this study is that the levels of sport and physical activity undertaken by children and young people will take some time to return to pre-pandemic levels. If this concern is borne out, then the SROI of individual development facilitated by sport and physical activity may be reduced for some time.

5.4 Social & Community Development

Social and Community Development is measured in three ways in the Sport England SROI model: incidence of crime; 'social capital', and; 'non-market value for sports organisations utilising volunteers'. By way of illustration, engagement with sport and physical activity has been linked to a reduction in criminal incidents involving young men. Participation is associated with enhanced social capital through extended social networks, increased trust, and reciprocity. Volunteers create non-market benefits to the organisations to which they give their time, and this contribution is worth at least the equivalent value of average hourly earnings.

As with other forms of social value, a significant proportion of the return on investment is generated in deprived neighbourhoods and communities with high levels of ethnic diversity. Community sport providers have highlighted a range of considerable challenges in encouraging junior members and participants to return to activity. While the overall impact of the pandemic on levels of crime remains unclear, it is likely that the social networks associated with clubs and other providers will have contracted and weakened, while the non-market benefits to sports organisations may have been lost, at least to some extent.

5.5 Implications for Social Return on Investment for Sport and Physical Activity

The generation of social and economic value from sport and physical activity is dependent on the ability of public, private, and volunteer operators to deliver without restrictions on their provision. Clearly, this was not the case in any part of the sector in 2020, and restrictions continue well into 2021. While the extent to which the return on investment may have been reduced over the last twelve months cannot yet be quantified, it is at least possible to identify which linkages between activity and social benefits may have been weakened.

Notably, the areas in which health inequalities are understood to be of greatest prevalence (deprived communities and communities with high levels of ethnic diversity) are also the areas in which this study has identified some of the most significant challenges in terms of reinstating activity opportunities. It is also important to note that active opportunities delivered through organised, community-based programmes (as opposed to activities undertaken by individuals) are of particular importance to these communities.

The reduction in junior memberships and the decline in participation derived from organised activity is likely to exacerbate the situation if it becomes a permanent shift. It is vital, therefore, that the findings of this report are considered alongside other studies and research outputs to help design tailored responses to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on community sport providers. There is a particularly strong case for investing in the reinstatement of active opportunities for those living in deprived communities and those living in averages of ethnic diversity, and young people everywhere. In this sense, the value of community sport providers to society has rarely been so high.

6. Conclusion

Throughout lockdown, community sport providers were unable to provide activity opportunities to their communities, which is understood to have affected the physical and mental health of participants and volunteers. Volunteers and organisation leaders have remained at the helm throughout the lockdown, and the survey shows significant enthusiasm from organisers to reinstate active opportunities as close to pre-pandemic levels as possible.

Analysis of the impact of the pandemic on finances has shown that the reduction of income has outpaced the reduction in expenditure, meaning that many organisations have had to rely on their savings to service bills and liabilities. There is also evidence that a significant proportion of respondents have deferred their liabilities until next year with the hope of being able to service these with revenue generated from renewed activities. The financial picture painted by this survey is that organisations are in a weaker position when compared to pre-pandemic levels, but not critically so.

With further support there is confidence of being able to reinstate a significant proportion of the active opportunities previously provided. The biggest barriers to reinstating active opportunities are centred on limited access to facilities and the capacity of volunteers to help organise and deliver activity. Should these two factors be addressed quickly then organisations will be able to return to a full programme of activity at a much faster rate. For organisations that need financial support, ensuring adequate access to loans and grants will also be key in expediting a full 'return to play'.

As this report has outlined clearly, the impacts of the pandemic have varied considerably between organisations according to the facilities they use, the activities they provide and the people whose participation they facilitate. The survey found that organisations serving deprived communities and communities with higher levels of ethnic diversity were generally affected to a greater degree than other providers. This may have implications for the future return on investment of sport and physical activity on social value outcomes in England.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the final timescales for the removal of Covid-19-related restrictions on sport and physical activity, it is recommended that the projections of community sport providers regarding their return to play and the key drivers and barriers that have affected them are revisited in a longitudinal study.

***David Barrett and Richard Coleman
Sport Industry Research Centre,
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Glossary of Terms

Active participation opportunities – a supply-side measure of the amount of active participation delivered by a community sport provider, measured in weekly minutes using the formula:

$$\text{Session Capacity} \times \text{No. of Sessions per Week} \times \text{Session Duration} = \text{Active Opportunity Minutes}$$

Community Sport Providers – an umbrella term for all organisations which deliver active participation opportunities in sport and physical activity.

Membership – affiliation to or with a community sports provider, for which a fee is generally charged.

Paid Staff – individuals who deliver services (usually coaching or tuition) on behalf of a community sport provider, in return for payment or benefits in kind.

Participation – a demand-side measure of sport and physical activity. Participation may be in the form of active participation (direct involvement in a sport) or volunteering as a coach, match official or administrator.

Volunteer – an individual who supports the delivery of sport and physical activity **without expectation** of remuneration or benefits in kind, though these may be offered in return for services rendered.

Volunteering opportunity – a supply-side measure of the amount of volunteer participation delivered by a community sport provider, measured in weekly minutes using the formula:

$$\text{No. of Volunteers per Week} \times \text{Avg. Time Given per Week} = \text{Volunteer Opportunity Minutes}$$

Voluntary sports club – a club or association comprised of members which operate on a not-for-profit basis. Income is often derived from membership and tuition or coaching fees, with any surplus funds reinvested in the club.

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