

## **Active Northumberland**

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Annual Outcome Report 2021-22 including the Service Plan Successes 2021-22

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## Vision

Our vision is “To be the Best Community and Wellness Provider in the UK” at delivering quality leisure, physical activity and sporting opportunities across Northumberland and to improve the health and fitness of the population of Northumberland in line with the Northumberland Health and Wellbeing strategy by 2022.

People in Northumberland will have a better quality of life as a result of their participation in physical activity and sport. Active Northumberland is not just about sport, it is about “wellness” and, feeling fitter, with a focus on improving health and wellbeing and preventing ill health and social isolation.

## Background

Active Northumberland (AN) is a registered charity (company limited by guarantee) formed in 2014 from a merger of several different leisure service providers.

AN has circa 670 employees consisting of a mix of contracted (both full and part time) and casual staff and a Board of 10 non-executive Directors (trustees) with a diverse and relevant range of expertise and senior level management experience. AN operates nine large leisure centres (some of which combine library services) and a number of smaller facilities, including school sport facilities, welfare centres and are responsible for the Pegasus Riding Centre which offers horse riding for the disabled and livery services. All of AN's facility and service management contracts are within the county of Northumberland.

The majority of the facilities operated by AN are owned by Northumberland County Council (NCC) and are leased to AN, who in turn manages the operation of leisure facilities and services for NCC under an Operating or Partnership Agreement. The Partnership Agreement, coupled with a performance management framework ensures progress is appropriately recorded and acknowledged, and that under AN's management, NCC's leisure assets and resources are optimised and successfully contribute to NCC's Corporate Plan priorities and objectives.

## Increasing Health & Social Impact

As part of the Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2028, we are working to deliver the strategic priorities together with, and complementing the work of, our partners.

<b>Giving children and young people the best start in life:</b>
<p>We understand how sport and leisure can make a positive contribution to children and young people (CYP), and we aim to ensure that they get a great start in life. We promote good physical health and wellbeing of CYP in Northumberland by offering schools and families a voucher system to attend centres in holiday times. We also continue to develop the junior gym offer across our portfolio of centres.</p> <p>We support schools within Northumberland by giving opportunities to develop whole school approaches in Physical Education, School Sport and Physical Activity (PESSPA) with the intent to develop positive attitudes to physical activity for CYP. The aim is for CYP to learn to have a lifelong positive attitude to physical activity which will in turn lead to healthy active lifestyles through their lifetime.</p> <p>We remain unique to any other leisure providers because we deliver a bespoke programme of Physical Education within schools using very experienced and qualified PE teachers. We remain the trusted and preferred provider within the county of Northumberland and have SLA agreements with 23 schools. Throughout Covid we supported schools through face-to-face delivery as well as virtual online curriculum support to ensure that they received a comprehensive programme of study. We continue to embed fundamental skills of physical literacy in schools to ensure the necessary building blocks are in place for a good start for CYP.</p> <p>The four School Games Organisers (SGO) have continued to deliver the national programme into schools across the four areas of Northumberland and have worked closely with the Active Partnership RISE and the other two SGO areas to ensure every school has received a consistent School Games offer. We adapted competition frameworks so that CYP could still participate in virtual competition and delivered county wide Zoom finals across six sports involving over 1500 CYP. The team have adapted to the new way of delivery, and we will continue to use a blended approach going forward. We are also working on a Commonwealth Games Project with the intention of delivering a county wide inclusive Commonwealth Games Legacy programme that will celebrate physical activity for all. We also secured funding from Barclays and the FA to deliver a girl's football programme in Berwick-Upon-Tweed.</p> <p>Our out of school hours, extra-curricular and school holiday programmes aim to support the requirement of every CYP to participate in 60 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). Unfortunately, due to Covid restrictions we have not been able to expand a holiday programme and will endeavor to develop this further in the future. We intend to target low socio-economic CYP groups as well as BAME, LGBT and SEND (Special Education Needs and Disabilities).</p>
<b>Empowering people and communities:</b>

Coming out of the pandemic we are anticipating a huge rise in mental health issues within our communities. For several years, we have hosted community Health Walks across the county for persons of all ages. The health walks program is free to access and is a great way for the residents of Northumberland to become more active, whilst also enjoying the social interaction aspect - both of which are vitally important when trying to tackle mental health problems.

Our aim is to encourage residents to utilise the County's vast open spaces for their physical health, but also create a support group for their mental health. Due to the scale of the groups, we rely on the support of walking volunteers, unfortunately some of which are now no longer able to volunteer for us due to the pandemic.

Our aim for 2021-2022 is to develop our walking volunteers using the Train the Trainer model. Volunteers will pair with Walk Leaders and in time lead the community Health Walks. Not only will this provide increased support for the Health Walks, but it will also create a positive impact within our communities and our volunteer workforce.

Similarly, our aim is to expand our organisation's current volunteer workforce into other areas of the organisation, such as gym support. Our volunteers will be able to support those who feel nervous about visiting our facilities offering a "buddy service" to make them feel at ease.

This year we have continued to work with our health walk partners Ramblers to support the transition from the previously branded 'Walking for Health', to the updated 'Wellbeing Walks' programme. This transition includes a new database to support the operation and data collection associated with the walking programme. As part of the transition to the new database we have worked with Ramblers to update and transfer our volunteer's data to ensure they are correctly set up on the new system. Understanding who is volunteering with Ramblers Wellbeing Walks is required for insurance purposes. Ensuring we have up to date records will mean we can communicate efficiently and effectively with volunteers whilst also enabling volunteers to access training and other important resources.

We have continued to work with our partners in the Ageing Well network. The ambition is still to work collaboratively across the wider health and care system to improve the health and wellbeing of our ageing population, whilst exploring the significant opportunities for change, workforce development and research. We will continue to have a presence at Ageing Well network events such as 'Step into Spring' and 'Winter Warmer'.

The Parkinsons Group has a capacity of approx. 12 attendees; however, the nature of the disease means that it's unlikely we will ever have a full capacity of 12 attendees each week. There are often hospital, doctors or Parkinson's nurse appointments, problems with new medications, or medications being altered which can have an effect on the attendees, meaning they may not feel well enough to come to the classes. Some members of the class travel in from the borders or from out in the country and sometimes transport issues may also mean they unable to attend. We currently have 1 member of the group undergoing

assessments for the DBS brain surgery which means she often travels to appointments in Glasgow.

There was never a pathway as such for referrals to the group, the Parkinsons nurses locally and in the borders are aware of our group and try to push people into coming along, there are flyers in the local doctors' surgeries and members of the group have also started up a Facebook page called "Berwick Parkinson's well-being group" where they aim to inform and gain new members to the Thursday morning class.

#### Tackling some of the wider determinants of health:

We are continuing to work closely with our partners to strengthen the services we provide to the public as preventative services, particularly as a result of the pandemic. During Quarter one we continued to deliver our Exercise Referral and Weight Management services digitally, allowing those who were not comfortable returning to facilities the opportunity to continue to be physically active. In facility delivery for Exercise Referral returned across the county from April and primary care were informed to resume referring into the service. We continue to attend events within primary care networks to promote our services and the role physical activity can play in the recovery from the pandemic.

Working with our strategic partner Northumberland Public Health, we received additional funding to deliver further places on our weight management programmes across the County. We have successfully introduced a self-referral mechanism meaning people interested in accessing the service no longer require a referral from primary care. This has resulted in an increase in referrals into the service. Those accessing the Weight Management service within our facilities are encouraged to continue to be physically active and are offered a number of exit routes from the programme. Working with Public Health we intend to use our data to identify gaps in provision and target areas of need to tackle obesity.

We have worked with the Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to reintroduce Cardiac Rehabilitation delivery in our facilities throughout the County. These programmes have returned to in facility delivery and continue to support those who have had a cardiac event. We have re-embedded our previous exit routes for those who complete the cardiac rehabilitation programme, offering the opportunity to take part in Exercise Referral, Weight Management, Health Walks or as an independent facility user.

We have worked with our volunteers to resume the Health Walks programme, offering the opportunity for residents to access free physical activity opportunities within their community. Our aim moving forward with the programme is to encourage more volunteers to be trained providing us with a well-trained and committed volunteer workforce to help manage the programme. Throughout the pandemic, the popularity of walking as a means of physical activity increased. We aim to capitalise on this and work with our communities and partners to promote walking as a form of exercise.

Work has continued, collaborating with our partners in Northumberland Public Health, to create and develop a new dashboard for the commissioned Exercise Referral and Weight Management programmes. This will allow us to use our data to performance manage our schemes across each facility more effectively. Working with our partners this data will also be useful in addressing gaps in provision and assessing who each scheme is being successful for. We have been identified as a partner to sit on the steering group for the weight management health care needs assessment in Northumberland aiming to co-develop an approach to managing healthy weight in adults across the county. We are also working with our partners in the council establishing a data collaboration group to support an audit taking place within the leisure review.

#### Adopting a whole system approach to health and social care:

Active Northumberland will continue to work collaboratively with our partners in Public Health and other Health & Wellbeing organisations to ensure we continue to promote the benefits of physical activity and help remove the barriers of access to our knowledge and facilities.

We will communicate this message through our website and social media channels, utilising our members experience/testimonials to advocate the benefits our service has had on their own personal Health & wellbeing.

We will continue to work with our partners in Public Health to develop our already very successful Exercise on Referral scheme. Using the data, we collect from the participants attending the scheme we will show the impact the scheme is having on both the individual and the wider community. Since returning in facility delivery we have seen an increase in the service.

We have worked with Escape Pain to continue our delivery of the programme both digitally and in person to those who suffer with knee and hip osteoarthritis. We are working with Escape Pain to evidence the effectiveness of our programme and aim to position ourselves as a commissioning partner of choice for future investment opportunities; seeking to use physical activity as a more cost- effective intervention than the prescription of pain medication.

We are working closely with a number of key partners as part of a weight management health care needs assessment for Northumberland. This is to help address the increasing prevalence of obesity and increase in demand of weight management services. With demand exceeding supply for weight management services, the aim is to quality assure and use finite resource to best effect keeping inequalities at the heart. We are also working closely with Northumberland Public Health to share data to support a review of services offered and provide information to assist with an audit being undertaken in conjunction with Health Equity Audit. This will help to understand how health and wellbeing can be impacted through leisure facilities and services. This will help support communities and longevity of community health & wellbeing. Active Northumberland will continue to work collaboratively with our partners in Public Health and other Health & Wellbeing organisations to ensure we continue to promote the benefits of physical activity and help remove the barriers of access to our knowledge and facilities.

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## Active Northumberland – Service Plan Success 2021-22

Our annual service plan outlines our intentions to achieve our objectives and improve our organisation. This section covers how we have met our objectives and improved our organisation to date.

### Improving service quality:

Leisure Facilities were closed from 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020 due to government legislation around the ongoing national pandemic, being able to reopen for outdoor activities from 29<sup>th</sup> March, gym and swimming sessions from 12<sup>th</sup> April and Indoor Group Exercise from 17<sup>th</sup> May.

During the closure, Active continued to offer interactive live fitness sessions for customers, combined with a library of classes for customers to access. These sessions provided a lifeline for many of our customers, often providing the only interaction that customers would have each day and helping to maintain the mental health of our communities.

With the relaxation of lockdown and the introduction of restricted access to facilities, we continued to offer online support for our customers, whilst allowing access to indoor sessions with the restrictions in place.

To continue to provide a top-quality service within our facilities, safety of customers and our team members was paramount during this period of reopening. All safety measures were implemented as advised by government, including increased sanitisation points, enhanced cleaning, the wearing of face coverings in public spaces, reduced numbers to allow for social distancing and increased ventilation across all facilities. We also continued to manage access via pre-booking and payment to ensure that capacities were not exceeded. Pre-paid bookings proved so popular with customers that we continued to operate different iterations as restrictions were relaxed and continue to promote pre-paid bookings to date.

Through keeping bookable time slots at the forefront of our access control, we have been able to reduce congestion at reception, within changing areas and within activity areas. By September, we had created an innovative approach whereby bookings are on a rolling basis, allowing a set amount of customers access over a set period to key activity areas (gym and swimming). Feedback from customers has been excellent and the system allows Manager's plan against a maximum demand.

As we moved out of restrictions, we allowed our members to freeze their membership until 30<sup>th</sup> June, providing an extended period for customers to feel safe returning to our facilities. At that point, any customers who chose to cancel their memberships, were allowed to do so without penalty.

At this point, we also commenced negotiations with our payment partner DFC to end our commercial arrangement due to the huge issues we have been experiencing with them both operationally and with customer care. Our debt management contract with the organisation, based upon feedback from both customers and team members that they were providing a

service that was not in keeping with our values. By the end of January, we had taken the process back in house, making payments easily accessible on Gladstone Pay, with easier payment look up and refund handling and processing.

By exiting from DFC, we hope to achieve a greater level of customer service, increased resolutions of membership queries, making the customer feel confident in Active Northumberland through taking ownership of customer queries.

The onboarding of members will be less confusing with only one-party sending communications and information, and we will no longer be chasing debt through a debt recover agency which appeared to have created a scare culture with members.

As part of our commitment to Quest and continuous service improvement, Ashington was assessed in July against the Quest Prime audit and received a “Very Good” band, scoring particularly well in areas of Health and Safety, Operational Management, Team Management, Programming, and the Customer Journey.

Positive comments received from mystery visits and the assessor included:

“I left the facility feeling that the centre was delivering a COVID safe operation.”

“The facility has a top-quality feel to it with the team doing their best to operate in terms of housekeeping and maintenance.”

“High levels of customer satisfaction suggest that work on cleanliness and hygiene is having a positive impact at the centre.”

“Polite, knowledgeable and customer focussed.”

To date, up to the end of 2021, we have operated within a national pandemic for 21 months, under closures, restrictions and ever-changing operating guidance. We believe that we have continued to operate, change and learn during this period of uncertainty and as a result have always continued to provide a top-quality service provision that continues to evolve and improve.

To support the above, we have continually updated our technology and systems to support the move to an online experience along with improving our member journey within our facilities. The move to pre-paid rolling bookings has only been possible with investment in our app that allows customers to easily navigate through activity choices and payments on their smart phones, whilst investment in RFID bands at some sites allows a seamless transition and fast track access into chosen activity of choice without the need for queuing at reception.

A continued transformation in our physical appearance and general rebranding has been undertaken during the first 3 quarters of 2021/22, with Strike Bowling having a rebrand to Hive Bowling and a continuation of the Hive and Active Northumberland brands being applied at both our new locations as well as retrospectively on our older sites too. Exterior signage to both Blyth and Concordia has been investigated in Q2/Q3 and is expected to be completed in 2022.

During the third quarter of the year, we completed our management restructure, which added a data analyst post to the central team. This post has already allowed us to identify where our members travel from as well as times when our members are at risk of cancelling.

Service quality improved in the North of the County with the opening of phase 1 of the new Berwick Sports and Leisure Centre in February, after significant delays to the build. The new £21m facility replaces the delapidated and outdated Swan Centre and provides a whole new quality and feel for customers, vastly improving the visitor experience. This is visibly noticeable for anyone walking through the door for the first time, to be met by a welcoming café and seating area and greeted at a serving point that contains both reception and café serving areas. Access control throughout the facility, three new self-service pods and investment in the RFID bands allows a seamless transition and fast track access into chosen activity of choice without the need for queuing at reception.

The quality of the finish to the new facility is once again equivalent to that of a private leisure club but providing equity of access to residents and the surrounding community.

The number of car parking spaces available for the new facility is currently an issue, and will remain an issue to be managed, until the old site is demolished, and the car park appropriately extended as per the site plans.

During this year we undertook an externally facilitated Customer Experience Training course for colleagues who have regular interaction with customers on a face-to-face basis. The training programme was successfully delivered to over 200 colleagues to help improve our engagement with customers across all levels of the business with the end goal to deliver exceptional experiences to our customers. The programme was well received by all those who attended.

This year has seen major challenges with HTH granules and did impact on the on our swimming pools, we managed to combat this by implementing contingency plans that saw pool plant systems modified to be able to switch to calcium hypochlorite as the main source of disinfectant

We rolled out site specific “Service Improvement Strategies” using recommendations from previous Pool Operational Health & Safety Audits undertaken by our partners Right Directions and Health & Safety Audits by Northumberland County Council. These strategies allow us to roll out recommendations efficiently across the estate providing consistency across all leisure centres.

#### Improving operational efficiency:

Operational efficiency improvements across the whole portfolio can be read in conjunction with reducing public subsidy through planned actions such as reviewing the operational cost of each facility, undertaking an organisational staffing review and maximising income opportunities through the leisure capital investment programme.

This section will, therefore, focus on how the Company has operated in a more efficient manner, to reduce the operating losses anticipated as a result of closures and reduced footfall across the year.

In the first quarter of the year, we fully maximised the Job Retention Scheme, ensuring that only key team members were brought back to work to operate facilities with reduced activities available. We reduced our opening times in line with demand and availability of services and only opened some of the smaller sites with restricted access times. This allowed us to operate with reduced staff costs, along with reduced utility costs.

Staff were only moved from furlough back into the workplace as and when restrictions were lifted and there was a requirement for them to return.

Some roles, such as Admin Managers and most of the trading staff, remained furloughed for the full duration of the Job Retention Scheme and only returned to the workplace on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020, having been on furlough leave for 18 months.

Q3 and the end of the furlough scheme allowed the opportunity to review staffing levels across the portfolio and approximately 50 casual colleagues who had been entitled to furlough payments left the Company, thereby reducing the number of assignments on the payroll.

A constant review of operating costs and footfall across the whole portfolio has seen some of the smaller sites continue to operate on reduced hours and services (Bedlington, Cramlington Sporting Club and Rothbury).

A detailed understanding of operating losses, both during this year and in the full operating year 2019/20, allowed us to commence negotiations with Cramlington Learning Village and Prudhoe High School with a view to returning the management of the sporting clubs to the schools to manage. Cramlington were keen to take over the management of their own facilities and this was facilitated on 31<sup>st</sup> December, with the ending of the management agreement. Prudhoe is expected to end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. Both facilities had failed to recover from the effects of the pandemic and continued to operate at a net deficit.

In July, we notified our team members that the impact of the pandemic had concluded that we were in a position where we forced to look to make a reduction in the number of some positions in certain areas of the business in order to better match current and future customer demand.

Despite having to make role reductions in some areas of the business we also proposed to recruit some key strategic roles to assist us in better managing the operational needs and performance of the company.

These proposals were finally implemented in October, removing a General Manager role, a number of Fitness Manager roles, Swimming Coordinator roles and Admin Manager roles. Operationally, an area model was created across the County (4 areas), with each area

consisting of a General Manager, Fitness Manager, Swimming Coordinator and Admin Manager. These areas are to be strategically supported by an Operations Manager, Health and Wellbeing Manager, Quality Assurance Manager, Data Analyst and Business Support Manager.

During the process, a number of other individuals requested to leave the Organisation via Voluntary Redundancy, with a final reduction of a head count of 20 and full year savings in the region of £320,000.

We continue to monitor usage patterns across the portfolio and react to changes in customer and club access times. In Q3 we opened Ashington earlier to our customers and closed earlier to consider a shift to earlier exercise patterns from the customers.

We have also undertaken a similar exercise for the new Berwick Leisure Centre so that we are able to open at the most opportune times once the facility opens in Q4.

The opening of Blyth Sports Centre upon the completion of the refurbishment in Q3 will allow an uplift in membership and footfall to improve the operating efficiency of the site.

Although we have managed and reduced our opening times across the portfolio in Q 1-3 to assist with reducing utility usage, the requirement to provide constant fresh air into facilities to meet government guidelines will have an adverse effect upon this strategy as air can no longer be recirculated, increasing heating and ventilation costs, compounded further by the increase in gas and electricity costs announced in Q3.

To counteract increased gas costs, we have sourced prices to fit pool covers to all swimming pools that should reduce heat loss, if the payback on expenditure is within an appropriate time frame.

The transfer of the management of Cramlington Sporting Club and Prudhoe Sporting Club back to their respective school hosts means that two sites that required a subsidy to operate have now been removed from our portfolio. The transfer of both services was seamless in both cases and had no detrimental effect upon any of our colleagues working at sites.

As stated above, despite the national shortage and availability of chlorine across the UK, our ability to adapt our systems to ensure that our swimming pools and spas have remained fully operating has ensured that we have maintained income levels associated with swimming across the portfolio.

#### Improving service usage and retention:

We have invested a lot of time analysing our membership portfolio to identify which members represent our biggest risk from a member retention perspective. The review has highlighted some key findings that is helping us to shape and redefine our member journey so that we can target and support the cohorts of members that fall into these high-risk categories.

One of the key findings that the review confirmed for us was those members engaging in a consultation/program upon joining us are visiting us more frequently and therefore much more likely to see value in their membership as a result of achieving their desired outcomes. This gave us reassurance that our strategy to engage customers in consultations/programs in the very early days of their membership is the correct one. Despite this, the review also highlighted a very low uptake of consultations/programs from new members and as a result made us consider how we engage with our new members.

As a result, in Q4 we have taken the decision to introduce 4 new posts, that of Member Engagement Advisors. These post holders will be primarily tasked with engaging with new members upon sign up with the ultimate goal of getting new members engaged with our Health & fitness teams via newly branded “Elevate” sessions. They will also spend a significant amount of their time engaging with members who are nearing the end of their membership with the end goal of getting them to further commit with us via a new contract.

We have redeveloped and rebranded our member onboarding process which now consists of three appointments: “Getting Started”; “Getting Active” and “Stay Focused”. All three appointments will come under the umbrella of “ELEVATE” which is what we have named our onboarding journey. Work is being completed to brand this new and updated fitness proposition with the aim of providing a clear message of support for our members in achieving their health and wellness goals. These sessions will be available for service users to book in Q1 next year 22/23.

We have also taken this as an opportunity to review how we communicate with our members, including our tone of voice and how we balance our electronic and in person engagement to ensure the member receives the correct information via the appropriate channel at the correct time. As a result, we have reviewed and amended our customer communications on sign up to provide our service users clear and concise information on getting the most from their visits with us.

#### Improving the community representativeness of service:

During this pandemic, we believe that our service has played a critical role in the County wide management of the pandemic and that this has supported our belief that the Company is fully representative of the communities where we operate and deliver.

The challenge of supporting NCC and NHS England to support the LFD testing and vaccination hubs within our facilities was a challenge that was embraced in 2020/21 and continued into this reporting period.

Up until the end of the furlough scheme our colleagues continued to manage and operate LFD testing sites at Ashington and Wentworth, along with the mobile unit in the Community. Wentworth and Berwick have also been used as hubs to deliver vaccinations to the Community. Colleagues have shown tremendous support for their communities and in turn the communities have been able to see the community spirit of Active.

Our Mams on the Move scheme continued to deliver to new mothers with online exercise sessions and support sessions whilst the group were unable to meet outdoors. The project, which aims to tackle inactivity in postnatal women, has continued to develop in Q3 with the launch of Aqua based sessions within our Southeast sites, ensuring that we are delivering both within the community and within our facilities.

The Nursery at Hirst has continued to provide an invaluable service to the community surrounding the welfare, ensuring that early year's education was provided during times of restrictions and when our other facilities and services were closed.

The opening of the Adult Learning Centre within Blyth Sports Centre provides further evidence of successful cojoined working with NCC and how our facilities are able to diversify and support communities in manner that is not sport or leisure related.

We continue to work with Public Health on delivering our exercise and weight management programmes to support their efforts to address health inequalities within Northumberland.

Both our exercise on referral and weight management programmes have returned very strongly and we appear to be on target to hit our targets come end of the financial year. Attendance figures are strong, and Active Life memberships should start to rise as participants complete their courses.

#### Improving service user satisfaction:

Early in the financial year we saw an increase in customer comments/complaints these are largely aimed at Customer Service and Membership. The main issue around customer service was the impact Covid has had on our teams with increased sickness. This forced our hand in reducing the opening times in the Contact Centre when necessary. As we returned from the pandemic, we saw a large increase in calls (calls doubled) which affected the service resolution time and the ability to manage customer expectations. The membership feedback was predominantly in connection to refunds which were very time consuming to action which created frustration for the customer.

We also received many complaints in connection to DFC. Active Northumberland was very unfortunate and had to deal with increased mistakes from DFC which had an impact on our customers experience. As stated above we served notice with DFC due to poor customer service with the aim of regaining the confidence from our customer base.

The feedback has since reduced significantly, and we started to see a little normality in the figures and customer satisfaction. A couple of items to address moving forward are class bookings and customers not attending, this has resulted in customers being dissatisfied.

We received the Net Promotor Score (NPS) results for our facilities in Q4. The overall operator score proved an increase from 43% in 2019-2020 to 48% in 2021-2022. The highest NPS received was for Ashington Leisure Centre (72%) with the lowest NPS at Willowburn Sports and Leisure Centre (18%). Feedback from the NPS has allowed us to develop a plan to address specific areas of concern to our customers. We have also trialled hosting customer focus groups at our facility at Wentworth in order to gain greater insight from our customer base to drive service improvement.

On the 15th of March, we launched our new phone system "Smart Agent", which is a cloud-based interface that enables web-based access to all contact types and channels. The

system has been designed to wrap around Amazon Connect, which is an overarching system that allows administrators to change, check, and analyse calls and data. This will allow us to understand customer trends by identifying call trends and adapt website and app accordingly to reduce repetitive calls. The system will provide in depth call analytics which detects sentiment and talk-time of the agent and customer for each call. All of this will allow us to better monitor our agent utilisation and quality check and control our calls. With the integration of the new system, updated KPI's have been set for the contact centre team. The analytics from the new system will allow us to better performance manage our staff and identify call trends. All of this will drive improvements in customer service and experience.

#### Improving employee satisfaction:

Early in the year we focussed upon all colleagues completing their Covid awareness training, which was externally accredited, whilst we also prepared for the launch of the improved learning and development platform. We also implemented our performance policy, aimed at providing all our team members with an appraisal and personal development plan. We have worked hard through the year to ensure that our colleagues are appropriately trained and provided with the information that they need to undertake their roles.

By Q3 all Senior Managers and Middle Line Managers had received their first appraisal and understand their job roles and how they fit into the Company.

Although the pandemic has curtailed our plans to move our casuals and true casuals onto permanent contracts, the end of JRS in Q2 has allowed some movement in this area, with a number of front of house and Leisure Attendant Colleagues being awarded contracted roles.

Version 2 of the Future Fit platform launched on the 1st of September 2021 supplying the Active workforce access to a wide variety of online courses including Equality and Diversity, Fire Safety, Mental Health Awareness and Safeguarding. The new platform enables all Active team members access to the full library of courses available. We have been monitoring our completion rates and encouraging those who are not fully compliant to undertake all required modules.

We have also worked with our Trade Union Colleagues to set up a Policy Subgroup to ensure that at least 2 people related policies are written and signed off by the subgroup each quarter.

Creative Sport & Leisure, one of our education partners, have supported us in the development of an Active Northumberland training and development matrix. This matrix identifies the minimum performance criteria for each job role as well as providing a training pathway for each employee.

As part of our continued drive to ensure that our staff feel safe and valued, we continue to invest in their health and wellbeing through allowing free access to our facilities and continuing with providing free access Westfield Health benefits; a scheme that places the needs of the workforce at the forefront of our health and wellbeing strategy.



We continue to improve our communication strategy with our people in order to inform them as to any developments within the Company and to recognise outstanding work by teams or individuals. "Active Unlocked" is sent every week and keeps our teams up to date with relevant information, covid updates and recognises outstanding individual and teamwork. We have also developed a tile on the Active Northumberland app for staff to access the latest information and updates.

In Q3 we sent out our "Great Places to Work" survey to our team members, with the intention of using feedback as an improvement tool and to hopefully enable us to be benchmarked nationally. In Q3 we also agreed a 1.5% pay increase for all colleagues with Trade Unions.

#### Staff and Family Memberships

During Q4 we undertook an externally facilitated Customer Experience Training course for colleagues who have regular interaction with customers on a face-to-face basis. The training programme was successfully delivered to over 200 colleagues to help improve our engagement with customers across all levels of the business with the end goal to deliver exceptional experiences to our customers. The programme was well received by all those who attended.

Due to the increase in the NLW in April, we communicated with our colleagues during Q4 that we were aware of the impact that this increase would have upon pay bands and that we were in early discussions with Trades Unions as to the pay award for April 2022.

Towards the end of the year, we launched our external apprenticeship programmes in partnership with Creative Sport & Leisure. 10 apprenticeships have been identified across Northumberland designed to train apprentices in a variety of operational qualifications currently difficult to recruit such as lifeguards, swimming teachers and fitness. These apprenticeships will be underway in Q1 of the new financial year.

We continue to up-skill our workforce using the same apprenticeship framework to train team members in specific hard to recruit positions. In Q4 we have 14 team members enrolled in these programmes.

We continued to develop our Flex Training and Development Platform in Q4 launching additional content and identifying external funding for training in partnership with Future Fit. The roll out of core skills and "Re-engage" courses which are fully funded by Sport England provide continuous professional development for our teams.

#### Reducing environmental impact:

Early in the year we reduced our environmental impact through reduced facility opening times and service activity times, along with the delayed opening of some facilities. Works commenced at Willowburn to install Ground Source Heat Pumps, which in time will reduce

gas demand on the facility. All works on the GSHP are expected to be completed by June 2022.

Revised government guidance in relation to Covid-19 emphasised the importance of maintaining increased ventilation within facilities, reducing the ability to recirculate waste warm air within facilities. This had a negative impact upon our Carbon Footprint as fresh air had to be continually heated prior to being pumped into our buildings.

Blyth's refurbishment was completed, along with a more efficient Heating and Ventilation System, replacing 50-year-old plant. When returning to facilities we also reduced the amount of chemical fogging undertaken at each facility, in line with revised government guidance.

A full ventilation audit undertaken by Health and safety team in Q3 and highlighted some areas where small improvements were needed. Chlorine levels were reduced back to pre-pandemic levels, reducing amount of chemicals used.

In Q1-Q3 where face coverings were mandatory, we asked our teams to provide their own washable face coverings to reduce the number of disposable masks that we provided and thereby reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill.

We continue to strive to reduce our DEC score through the continued investment in the estate and installation of energy saving measures. Our average DEC score is 11 points lower than the National Average and we aim to reduce this further once new facilities are open.

To counteract increased gas costs, we have sourced prices to fit pool covers to all swimming pools that should reduce heat loss, if the payback on expenditure is within an appropriate period.

Approval of additional leisure remedial funds to upgrade to LED lighting within Newbiggin Sports Hall has been received.

The opening of the new facility at Berwick in Q4 will reduce waste heat to the environment through the operation of solar panels and up to date heat waste recovery systems.

#### Reducing public subsidy:

The public sector continues to face unprecedented financial, health and social challenges because of the national pandemic and the subsidy required to operate the Company during this period increased due to enforced facility closures, the inability to offer a full programme of activities and reduced capacities due to social restrictions and national guidance.

Against the financial demands faced by the Council and the Company, we believe that Active Northumberland continues to be best placed to help the Council meet these health and social challenges and to help readdress health inequalities and to help break down barriers to enable residents who are socially excluded, disadvantaged, isolated and vulnerable to participate in physical activities to achieve their wellness goals.

We continue to work with the Council with their review of Leisure Services and are in dialogue around a potential new partnership agreement to run concurrently from when the current agreement ends in March 2022.

We also continue to seek a longer partnership agreement that provides stability and assurance for our workforce, but also allows for a reduced subsidy arrangement over a fixed period, considering the current position of the Company during the pandemic, whilst also realising new income opportunities that can be created with the completion of new leisure facilities in Berwick (February 2022) and Morpeth (Spring 2023).

Our restructure in Q2/3 reduced staff costs by £320,000 for a full year, whilst also implementing a structure to take the Company forward post pandemic through better management and accountability within our business. The restructure savings will be realised fully during the next financial year.

Q1-3 We have significantly reduced our end of year budget forecast through full use of the Job Retention Scheme, improving access to activities, improving retention of members and reducing operating costs across the organisation.

Q1-3 The operation of the new facility at Ponteland has helped to drive increased income at the site, led by a substantial increase in new members and an increased demand for swimming.

Q1-3 Public swimming has increased for the first time in a number of years.

Q3 We have recovered our membership numbers to pre-pandemic levels.

Q1-3 We have reduced our PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) costs in line with relaxed guidance and legislation and through colleagues providing reusable face coverings.

Q1-3 We continue to monitor our staffing costs and requirements in line with new service delivery models.

Against the backdrop of unprecedented increases in gas and electricity costs, we continue to grow income streams and reduce operational expenditure, wherever possible.

#### Growing revenue:

Despite beginning the financial year with restrictions in place, we have managed to grow our income from our budget position by significant amounts as a result of capital development coming to fruition in the terms of Ponteland and Blyth, clever reprogramming of activities, successful marketing campaigns and retaining visibility within the communities during times of closures and restrictions.

Improved functionality of the App to make it easier to book and pay in advance has helped to grow our online income.

Income figures and membership numbers indicate that proper investment can drive revenue growth within leisure facilities.

The new Ponteland Leisure Centre is a huge asset to Active. The 6 Lane 25m pool and the separate studio pool has increased our usable water space by 60% over the old pool. However, with the opening of Ponteland during a pandemic it has placed significant pressures on the LTS (Learn to Swim) scheme and the potential to maximise income owing to restricted class provision and reduced lesson capacity. Since opening in December 2020, the programme has increased its participation number from 537 to 675 at the end of May. Opportunities for growth in the lower Stage classes has been maximised with 99% occupancy in the Stage 1 classes, we are struggling to move them through the scheme fast enough to keep up with demand. The easing of restrictions and the removal of the 15-minute cleaning breaks between lessons means we can increase our capacity by 8 additional lessons per night without increasing our staffing costs allowing us to focus on class provision based on demand.

Where we have opened or refurbished new gyms and studios, at Ponteland and Blyth, we have seen dramatic increases in membership numbers, across all age ranges.

The Learn to scheme restarted on April the 12th after being suspended from January - mid April. The road map dates of reopening were suggested for staggered return to normal with the final release date announced as the 21st of June. This was then postponed to the 19th of July with the increase in the Delta variant. During Quarter 1 we adjusted the classes previously offered, increasing our Stage 1 class provision to try and deal with ever increasing demand for 4-year-olds to start swimming. With the restrictions in place until the mid-July we continued to deliver the LTS scheme under the COVID restrictions for the 4 weeks of the summer term.

We introduced a small number of Stage 1 & 2 classes into the Swan Centre from June Half term - the end of the summer school term 6 weeks in total. Planning and creating a term time LTS scheme and price offering for the new Berwick Leisure Centre.

During Quarter 2 we remodelled the LTS scheme for September, Increasing the number of classes as we remove the 15-minute breaks allowing for between 6 - 8 additional classes per centre per day. This helped with demand for lower stage lessons allowing to accommodate the increased demand. And allowing the customers options to move to their preferred site creating options for the higher stage at Ashington and the lower stages at Morpeth.

We introduce Stage 1, 2 and 3 classes back into Concordia Leisure Centre, with the same term time LTS scheme and pricing structure of the Swan Centre.

The restructure of the scheme has increased income without increasing our staffing costs.

During Quarter 3 we have introduced our Pre School framework across six of our nine pools. Offering classes from 12 weeks – four years This will help participants to gain water confidence prior to moving into a Stage 1 class helping reduce the time needed to master that stage.

We have planned the re-introduction of the LTS scheme at Berwick. Looking to continue to cater for the current Stage 1, 2 classes expanding where possible and introduce a full programme back into the New Berwick Leisure Centre, with the same term time LTS scheme and pricing structure of Concordia Leisure Centre.

From July 2021 – December 2021 we have a 42% increase in participants and an overall Occupancy of 87%

Q4. From the end of Q3 the Learn 2 Swim Scheme has grown from 5362 – 6136 which is an Increase of 14% in three months. The introduction of the new classes at Berwick Leisure, the increase in lesson capacity at Prudhoe Waterworld and the continued growth across all centres along with the increase in Pre School, Adult LTS and one – one lessons has led to the growth.

The growth has increased the pressure on each stage with the average occupancy level at 96% across the LTS scheme. Significantly higher than the desired 85% goal.

Q4. From the end of Q3 we increased our Pre-school offer. Increased awareness new provision at Ponteland and Berwick. We have Increased our Pre-school customer base from 122 – 272 showing a 123% growth. As we recruit more Swimming Instructors this will help increase our provision across each framework.

#### Ensuring performance against budget profile:

In February we finalised our budget for this financial year, at a time when facilities were closed, and future opening plans and additional operating restrictions were unknown.

By the end of Q3, we are confident that we are significantly clawing back our budgeted losses.

Our Senior Executive team continue to meet with our Finance Manager from NCC on a monthly basis to receive a detailed budget report that is then presented bimonthly to our finance and audit committee.

Our Senior Management team continue to meet with the NCC Accounts Team to discuss their budget in detail in order that they fully understand their performance and forecasted budget position.

The introduction of our Performance Management Policy and the reporting of KPI's allows Senior Executive team to also pick up any issues with management of budgets by budget holders and implement support measures to ensure that performance is in line with budget.

#### Attracting external grant support:

Our employees have a wealth of health and wellbeing knowledge that can benefit the communities within the County. We will therefore continue and increase our contribution to consultative discussions with Northumberland County Council, NHS Trusts and other key partners to consider and further support new ways of providing sustainable services to improve public health, and by doing so reduce the rising demands on the health and social care system.

We recognise that community health and wellbeing issues differ throughout Northumberland as a result of the County's sociological perspective and demographic. Working collaboratively with the County's Town Councils, we can support the delivery of common social outcomes and form a foundation for communities to build on. We have already successfully obtained funding via partners such as Sport England to successfully deliver the School Games, Secondary Teacher Training and Mams on the Move, that play a vital role in our communities. We're committed to working with our partners to secure further grant support and support and deliver programmes in our communities that will have a worthwhile social impact.

In addition, strengthening our Service Level Agreements for the delivery of PESSPA within Northumberland's First, Primary, Middle, High and Special schools can increase the ability for attracting external grant support. Schools continued to support Service Level Agreements for next academic year and committed readily as we are a trusted, quality assured provider. Additional funding from DFE (Department for Education) to deliver a Secondary Teacher Training programme has been secured for next academic year, as well as FA funding to deliver a girls' school/community football programme in the north of the county. Working in collaboration with RISE, the active partnership, during Q3 we have also been able to secure additional funding to deliver School Games programmes as well as receiving confirmation that funding will continue until the end of this academic year. We are confident that this will continue into the following academic year too.

Due to the pandemic's catastrophic effect on our revenue generating abilities, Active Northumberland and Northumberland County Council submitted a bid to the National Leisure Recovery Fund. We have been successful in our application and have been granted the maximum £750k, and this money is being distributed between the 2020/21 fiscal year, and that of 2021-22. The NLRF funding has been distributed across the AN portfolio during all 4 Quarters of the financial year according to the qualification criteria.

#### Capital Investment:

Capital developments have continued to push on despite the challenges which have been encountered by construction market shortages of both labour and materials and also the ongoing impact of Covid-19, which again has also had an impact on the readily available workforce.

### **Blyth Sports Centre Refurbishment**

Following on from the completion of the refurbishment works to the swimming pool hall and changing rooms as well as phase 2 developments during 20/21, the final phase of the development was concluded in October. The final phase enabled the opening of the new Hive café spaces, Childrens Softplay and dedicated seating area, Group Cycling studio with state-of-the-art Technogym cycling bikes and virtual offer, a much-improved retail offer and new reception hub with self-service kiosks. All internal works are now complete at Blyth Sports Centre although a final design for new signage to the exterior of the building is currently in design.

### **Berwick Leisure Centre New Build**

During the beginning of this financial year work continued on site with the aim to complete phase 1 of the new building. The building was due to be handed over to Active Northumberland in late November however due to the aforementioned delays with Covid and issues around supplies and labour the development ended up being completed 23 weeks behind programme. During this time Active Northumberland continued to plan for the new site and operate the existing site as usual. Working closely with the wider project team and Tolent, Active Northumberland were able to carry out a lot of installs which sat outside the main contract arrangements as well as develop key operational and emergency plans as well as review staffing, programming and budgeting requirements for the new building. In December Active Northumberland took over the day-to-day pool maintenance tasks such as chemical dosing which assisted with both quality control and helping to manage a seamless handover between contractor and operator.

As of July 2021, the centre also assisted with the set-up of the county's vaccination and flu booster programme by hiring out of facilities in the current site. Due to the size and space of the indoor bowls hall this has helped significantly in the roll out of the programme. It is expected that the vaccination programme will continue to be rolled out in the existing site over the next quarter and beyond whilst phase 2 developments begin to take shape which will see the demolition of the old swimming pool hall and construction of the new 4 court sports hall as well as works to the external layout of the building and new car park.

### **Morpeth Leisure Centre New Build**

Site works continue on the Morpeth's leisure centre and community hub on Gas House Lane and is on schedule to open Spring 2023.

The new centre will include a six-lane swimming pool with spectator gallery, a learner pool, Soft play facilities, new Tranquillity spa facilities and a four-court sports hall. A state-of-the-art fitness suite will be located to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor and include a range of fitness experiences such as a Functional Training area as well as the first Technogym Bio-Circuit experience in the

county. The centre will also see a much-improved fitness studio offer with a dedicated cycling studio and 2 large fitness studios to deliver an enhanced group exercise and community fitness activities. Our new front of house customer experience will provide a modern and welcoming cafe and reception hub.

The centre will also incorporate a new community services hub which will include the town's library, a customer service centre and an adult learning facility.

### **Newbiggin Sports & Community Centre Refurbishment**

The re-development of Newbiggin Sports and Community Centre commenced in November 2021 following the appointment of Brimms as main contractor.

Working closely with Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) Active Northumberland are continuing to review a sustainable operating model for the refurbished facility, given the requirement to have a facility that meets specific community needs and create a facility that will foster greater community use.

Additional funding has been allocated from the leisure remedial budget for improvements to both the sports hall roof and upgraded LED lighting to the sum of £250k.

As part of the wider development £250k Football Foundation funding was secured to complete works to the external football pitches. Work commenced on site for the pitch works from April 2022. The Pitches will be required to be settle for approximately 12 months therefore will not be fully accessible until Autumn 2023.

All works are expected to be completed by summer 2022 where a full re-opening of all areas will take place.

### **Leisure Remedial Programme 2021/22**

Active Northumberland continue to work closely with the Council's Property Services department and Capital delivery team to implement a Planned Preventative Maintenance (PPM) programme which in the first instance looks to address key remedial works identified in leisure site condition surveys.

The programme priorities have identified a number of key remedial works following a review of both condition survey priorities and on-site operational input where any backlog maintenance issues could have a significant impact on key operational and financial aspirations, reduced levels of customer satisfaction and unplanned closures.

A number of remedial projects have now been completed or are in progress, schemes include;

Work is progressing with the redesign of a new café, softplay and Hive bar area at Wentworth, with expected start on site during Summer 2022. Phase 1 of the refurbishment will see a new Hive café and softplay area followed by Phase 2, with the refurbishment of the



Hive bowling area. This will provide a much-needed new softplay offer for Families and children with an improved café and bar offer.

The install of a new mains electricity supply at Concordia Leisure Centre ensuring a new and reliable source for the future and reducing our risk of a mass closedown due to a failed supply.

Completion of new office space at Concordia Leisure Centre which also addressed the issue of redundant space following the relocation of the Council's Library and Customer Services functions in September 2021 to 'The Hub', Cramlington. Further works will take place to the upstairs community room space to provide additional office accommodation.

Re-install of the wet side changing room floors at Concordia Leisure centre following defects from work previously undertaken back in summer 2019.

Replacement of the steel structure and moveable floor on the studio pool at Wentworth Leisure Centre addressing major operational and safety concerns.

Working closely with the Council's Property team, plans are now afoot for delivering key priorities for the 2022/2023 Leisure Remedial Scheme which include further investment into.

Due to many of our leisure sites remaining closed at the early part 2021, ongoing maintenance and re-decoration works continued to be carried out across the estate, prioritizing areas of high customer use and therefore minimizing impact on customers when restrictions were lifted. A continuous programme of re-decoration works has taken place throughout the last three quarters to ensure public areas of the leisure buildings remain presentable, clean and commercially viable.