

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 10th July 2025

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director Environment and Regeneration

PORTFOLIO: Corporate Resources
Employment, Learning, Skills and Community

SUBJECT: Health and Leisure in Halton

WARD(S) Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to ask Executive Board to consider the relationship between increasing the cost of local authority leisure facilities to residents and the potential impact on health inequalities in the borough. Executive Board is also asked to consider whether it would wish to subsidise leisure activities for certain groups in the borough. The report sets out options for how this might be implemented.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That Executive Board is requested to consider the proposals outlined in section 4 of this report.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 Priority one of the Council's Corporate Plan is "Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence". The priority is underpinned by the need to "encourage good quality health, wellbeing and social care, by involving everyone in our community to support the people of Halton to feel safe, be active, happy and lead their best lives".
- 3.2 It is considered that a lack of physical activity can affect a person's health and wellbeing. Research would suggest that the cost of using leisure centres can be a particular barrier for households that do not have much money, and offering reduced entrance charges can support people to lead more active lives.
- 3.3 Although not a statutory requirement, the Council has demonstrated its commitment to improving leisure facilities in Halton with the development of the £30 million state of the art Halton Leisure Centre. However, the repayment of the loan on the capital expenditure requires the Council to operate the facility on a commercial basis and alongside cuts in funding, the Council needs

to take difficult decisions about whether to subsidise leisure facilities or conversely increase entrance charges.

- 3.4 This dilemma recently came to the fore when the Head of Service for Leisure Services was approached by Halton Walking Football Club which had seen an increase in its subscription fees and requested a subsidy to meet the increased costs. The club has approximately 80 members.
- 3.5 Research published by the NIHR school for Public Health Research some years ago suggests that offering concessions to people over 60 years helped slow down the decline into inactivity that often occurs as people get older.
- 3.6 The club accepted that the fee needed to rise to reflect the improved leisure facilities that the Council provided. At the same time the club members argue that going forward some members of the club will be priced out of participation.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Using the Halton Walking Football club as a case study. In summary, the Leisure Services team has been working with the club to agree a rental of space at the new leisure centre. The current proposal is as follows:
1. 'Pay as you play' was until 31 March 2025 (£1.90 with a Halton Leisure Card and £2.80 without)
 2. From 1 April 2025 – 31 December 2025 £45 for a 1.5-hour session (includes 30 minutes free hire)
 3. From 1 January 2026 - £67.50 for a 1.5-hour session (and subject to annual increases on 1 April)
- 4.2 Both 2 and 3 reflect a discount of 25% discount.
- 4.3 The club members have asked that the Council considers several factors that they feel demonstrates that they are contributing to reducing the Council's budget through 'costs avoidance' i.e. healthier lifestyles, as well as improved health and well-being.
- 4.4 The club members make some valuable points, but this presents a broader corporate question that goes beyond rents and room hire at the leisure centre but focuses on how the Council promotes cross-directorate collaboration to contribute to delivering wider corporate priorities.
- 4.5 Leisure services staff have worked with the club to arrive at a compromise position to cover the period up to the end of the year.

- 4.6 This has been accepted but the increase from January 2026 has not. Ultimately, though, the Council's Leisure Services team is running a business and must recover our costs, and, therefore, it is not able to support a further subsidy from January 2026 as the club has requested.
- 4.7 This leaves the following potential scenarios:
1. The club pays the increase.
 2. The club does not pay the increase and does not use the facilities.
 3. The club reduces the number of sessions per week or reduces the length of the session.
 4. The Council subsidises their activities.
- 4.8 Regarding point 1, there is scope for the club to make a contribution and some of the gap might be covered through further negotiation as well as some club members subsidising less well-off members. Regarding point 2, if the club ceases to use these facilities, the Council would still be able to generate income as there are other organisations that would take up the space. However, the 'wider' benefits to residents described above would be lost. Regarding point 4, for parity, the Council would need to apply the same levels of subsidy to similar groups.
- 4.9 Given the points the club makes regarding the health and wellbeing benefits gained from participation in physical activity Executive Board is asked to consider whether, it supports the principle of subsidising leisure activities for groups **specifically** using the **new leisure centre on Moor Lane**.
- 4.10 The reason for focusing on the new leisure centre is as follows:
- To offer subsidies at all Council venues would be unworkable and not financially viable.
 - Secondly, it is reasonable to suggest that there are exceptional circumstances regarding fees and charges for groups/organisations that are transitioning from Kingsway Leisure Centre to Halton Leisure Centre.
- 4.11 It should be noted that many groups at the former Kingsway Leisure Centre received favourable and 'below market' terms given the state of the building and the equipment and facilities available.
- 4.12 The new facility presents an opportunity for the Council to increase fees and charges to reflect the improved offer provided by a state of the art facility.
- 4.13 However, given the points raised in section 4.1 there are some options Members may wish to consider.

- 4.14 Option 1 - Establish/Repurpose the Sports Development Grants programme.
- 4.15 The criteria for the current grants programme would need to be amended as the grant does not allow for grant to be spent on ongoing room hire.
- 4.16 It is worth noting that many groups/organisations already receive a grant. The maximum grant is currently £300.
- 4.17 This is not a preferred option because the existing grants programmes is for a specific purpose i.e. to promote sports development. Members are asked to note that the sports grants budget has been reduced from £20,000 to £11,000.
- 4.18 Option 2 - Introduce a transitional grant for organisations affected by a change to the fees and charges arising from the move from Kingsway Leisure Centre to Halton Leisure Centre on Moor Lane.
PREFERRED OPTION
- 4.19 This would be **specifically** for groups using Halton Leisure Centre to facilitate the transition from lower rents at the former Kingsway Leisure Centre.
- 4.20 It is suggested that criteria would need to be introduced as follows.
- The grant would be for a period of six months to enable clubs/groups to prepare for the step up to increased costs.
 - The grant would be used for room hire at Halton Leisure Centre.
 - Individuals would not be eligible to apply.
 - The grant would apply to groups of 20 or more. The reason for this is that the impact of the intervention will be greater.
 - The maximum discount for the six-month period would be 50%.
 - The grant would only apply during the period 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026
 - It would apply to Halton based groups/clubs residents.
- 4.21 Although there are advantages and disadvantages of this option, this is the preferred option because it strikes a balance between supporting our clubs and groups whilst acknowledging that the Council's financial position prevents it from applying a long-term subsidy to this type of activity. It provides planning time to enable organisations to prepare for increased charges. Members may recall that similar principles were applied to protect the viability of organisations facing financial constraints during Lockdown/COVID-19.
- 4.22 Option 3 - Apply a Concession.
With this option, groups would make an application, and their

proposal would be considered on a case-by-case basis. Cases could then be determined by the Head of Service for Leisure Services in consultation with the relevant portfolio holder. The difficulty with this approach is that it places an additional workload on the Head of Service and Portfolio Holder and could lead to further time burden were requests to be unsuccessful and appeals would need to be considered.

- 4.23 Option 4 - Do Nothing.
This is an option but would not reflect the points raised earlier in this report.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 It is estimated that by extending this subsidy to other organisations, including the walking football club, would cost the Council approximately £20,000 in lost income/additional expenditure. The other option would be to reduce income targets, for Leisure Services, but ultimately this would then mean that the Council would still need to find resources from somewhere to cover the subsidy.

- 5.2 An ongoing subsidy would be unsustainable, but it is suggested that the Council might wish to provide some transitional support as outlined above.

- 5.3 This could be funded by a contribution of £6,666 from Adult Social Care, Public Health and Leisure Services.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The introduction to this report outlines proposals for supporting this priority.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

One of the barriers to productivity in Halton's economy is the high levels of ill-health the borough experiences either preventing people from accessing work or making it difficult for people to remain in work.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

Using the case study as an example, a healthier fitter society enables individuals to proactively engage with family members in a positive way.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most in Need

The report suggests that it is often the people who are most in need that are prevented from accessing the Council's services. Where services are non-statutory and there is a fee, low income can be a

barrier to participation.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

If residents are fit and well, they are more likely to be able to use the walking and cycling networks being brought forward through the Liverpool City Region Sustainable Transport network.

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community

The approach outlined in the report present a positive news story for the Council where it demonstrates that it has listened to the views of the community, recognised the benefits of working collaboratively and has delivered a cross-directorate approach to meeting corporate priorities.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 There is a danger of a precedent being set i.e. if one group is provided with a subsidy then other requests will follow. The risk of this could be reduced if the Council were to introduce qualifying criteria to determine when and if subsidies would apply.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 8.1 The report outlines the challenges to equality of access when the Council is faced with increasing costs, which can inadvertently exclude members of the community who are on low incomes.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Reference is made to supporting the corporate objective of a greener future in section 6.5 of the report.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

‘None under the meaning of the Act.’