

COVID-19 Recovery and the Cost of Living Crisis

A survey of grassroots community
clubs and groups

Introduction

The Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA), supported by Sport:80, commissioned the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University to conduct an online survey of sports clubs and other organisations supporting the delivery of sport and physical activity in the summer of 2022. The survey was designed to replicate a study carried out in 2021 which sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the many organisations which deliver sport and physical activity across the UK. An online questionnaire was sent out to voluntary sports clubs, youth organisations, private companies and groups delivering coaching and generated 450 responses. The findings give an indication of the experience of voluntary clubs over the last 12 months and make some early forecasts of the impact of the cost of living crisis.

The findings of the latest survey go some way to confirming the predictions made by clubs towards the end of the lockdown restrictions. Membership affiliations are returning to pre-pandemic levels, and many clubs believe that over the next 12 months they will see an increase in activity. Nevertheless, the threat posed by recent increases in the cost of living looms large over the sector and evidence from the survey confirms that the impact of inflation is being felt by those at the coal face of delivering activities in local communities. While most organisations have the knowledge and resources to withstand the initial shock of rising energy prices, continued increases in the cost of living would endanger the long-term sustainability of many clubs and organisations.

What we did

In consultation with the SRA, the Sport Industry Research Centre designed an online questionnaire based on the 2021 survey. The questionnaire was sent out to over 800 clubs and individuals that participated in the 2021 research, and via the SRA's network of national governing bodies and other organisations which support deliverers. The survey asked respondents to compare the performance of their club over the last 12 months with the pre pandemic position, and to project forward to next year, in considering six key themes:

- Finance – income, and expenditure (including specific questions about energy prices);
- Membership – adult, junior and social;
- Participation opportunities;
- The paid and volunteer workforce – coaches, administrators, facility managers and others;
- Facilities – use of playing and social facilities, tenure, and;
- Mitigations – income generation, cost control, diversification,

Sample profile

Between May and August 450 clubs, charities, private companies and voluntary groups completed the questionnaire, including many who had participated in the previous research exercise. As with the 2021 survey, the majority of these responses came from voluntary sports clubs in England. Respondents were recruited from online promotion via the S+RA's network, the Club Matters Network, and other member-networks. The bulk of responses were from clubs that took part in the 2021 survey and expressed an interest in being part of follow-up work. A sample of this size meets statistical confidence level thresholds of 95% with a % margin of error. However, when the survey is segmented, response rates fall below these thresholds. Further, due to a lack of national level data, it is difficult to know if our is biased toward certain types of club or not. Therefore, we believe the findings below should be considered robust enough to develop an indicative picture of the current state of play.

Of the organisations responding to the survey, 73% were clubs affiliated to a National Governing Body of sport (NGB), with a further 10% of responses from volunteer community groups delivering sport in the community. Organisations were also classified by their tenure of the facilities which they use for playing, training and socialising. Facility-renting organisations were the largest group in this respect, making up 37% of the sample overall, followed by organisations which use facilities on a casual of 'pay-as-you-play' basis (20%), and organisations which lease their facilities (16%).

Asset-owning organisations accounted for only 15% of those who responded to the survey, while the remainder were nomadic organisations (7%)¹ and organisations using public space (4%).

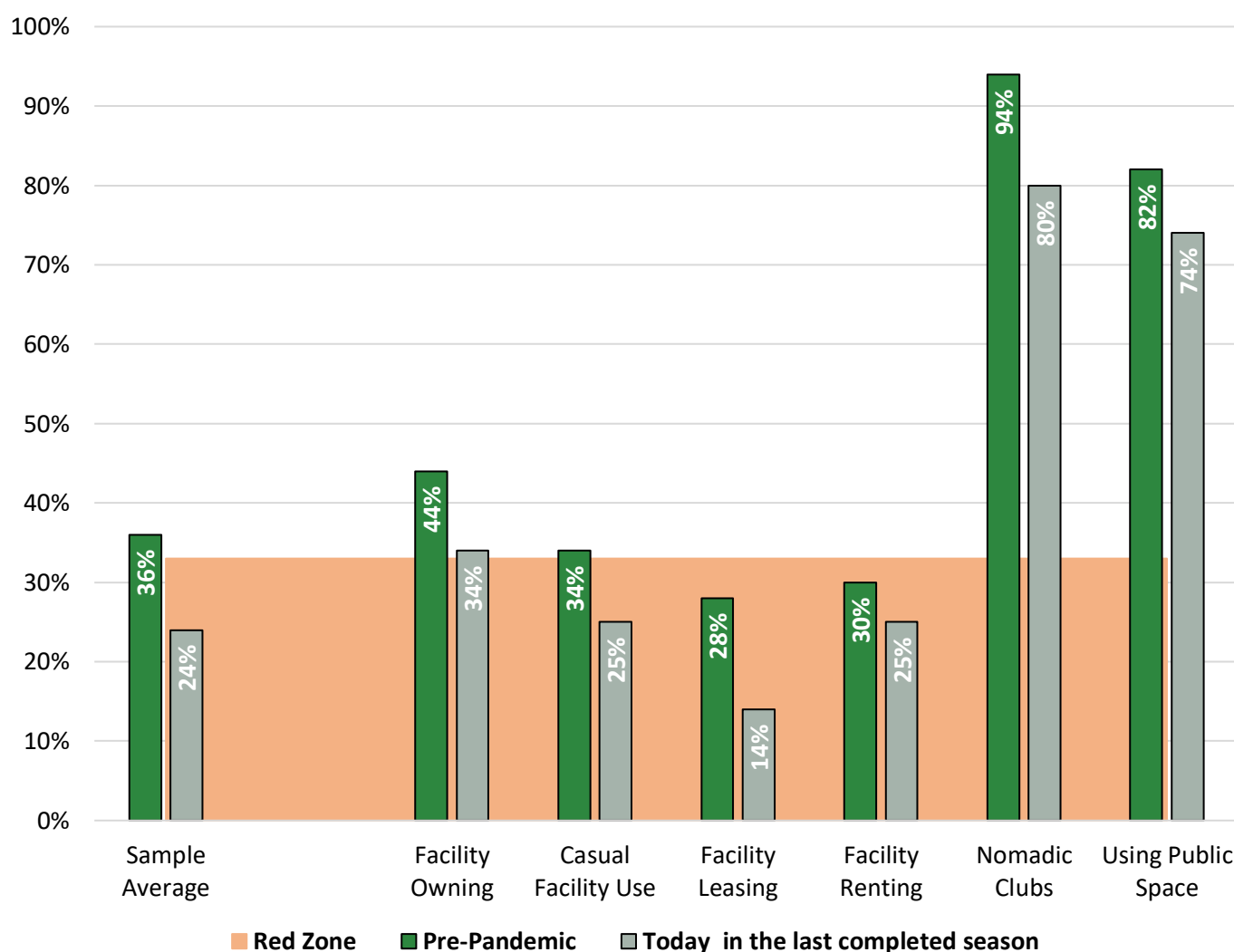
Just under 40% of respondent organisations are based in the more deprived parts of the country, with 15% located in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods. While this might suggest that organisations in more deprived neighbourhoods were under-represented in this research, these figures compare favourably with the known location of sports clubs. Sport England's Club Count exercise found, for example, that 42% of affiliated clubs were located in deprived areas in 2017 and 13% were located in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Finally, we note that 44% of responses came from organisations based in urban areas, and 56% from rural locations.

What we found

Club finances are under significant strain

The primary financial impact of COVID-19 was a significant reduction in the cash reserves held by voluntary clubs. The cumulative effect of operating over the pandemic is illustrated in Fig 1 (below), which shows the ratio of reserve levels to annual income. For the purposes of this analysis, clubs with reserves equivalent to 33% of their turnover are considered to be operating prudently, while a ratio below this level is considered to be a financial 'red zone'. This metric was also applied to our 2021 study. It must be noted, clubs operating in or close to the 'red zone' have less headroom to absorb sudden unbudgeted costs (such as a repairing damage to equipment or facilities), they cannot 'smooth' or delay the passing on of costs increases to members/participants, and they are more at risk of bankruptcy from short term financial stresses.

Figure 1 - Ratio of Financial Reserves to Annual Income



¹ Nomadic organisations are those which are not tied to a specific location for their activities, such as rambling, running or road cycling clubs.

Figure 1 shows that, prior to the onset of the pandemic, the 'typical' club had financial reserves equivalent to 36% of income, but this figure has fallen to 24% over the last 12 months, meaning that clubs have less ability to withstand further shocks to the system, threatening their long-term sustainability.

As the graph shows, impacts vary between clubs depending on their facility tenure. For nomadic clubs (94%) and those using public space (82%), reserve levels were much higher than average before the pandemic and remain so today, despite falling over the last 12 months. Conversely, those organisations which rent or lease their facilities had reserves below the desired level before the onset of COVID-19, and the combined impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis has been to drive these further downwards.

The effect is particularly marked for clubs which lease their facilities, whose reserves have halved since the pandemic. One possible explanation for this may be that they are more likely to be tied into long-term agreements in which fees and charges are fixed. Interestingly, asset-owning clubs were able to maintain reserves at just above the desired level (34%), though this still represents a fall of 10% compared with before the pandemic. If this trend were to continue, asset-owning clubs would also drop into the more financially vulnerable category.

Further analysis of the data (not shown on the graph) shows that 26% of reserve holding clubs are currently operating in the financial 'red zone' (holding reserves below 33% of annual income). Worryingly, the number of clubs operating in the 'red zone' is expected to increase to 37% over the next 12 months, according to clubs' projected financial position. For reference, our 2021 survey showed 12% of clubs operating in the 'red zone' prior to the pandemic.

The above shows clearly that as a trend, community clubs have eaten significantly into their financial reserves since the start of the pandemic. This trend has not paused or ceased since the return from COVID-19 and is projected to continue in the face of inflating supply-side costs. Overall, the financial picture for community clubs is one of increasing precariousness.

Underlining this, the proportion of clubs operating without recourse to any financial reserves has increased from 25% in 2021 to 32%, while more clubs have reported the need to access reserve funds to meet liabilities, up from 45% to 50%.

The above shows that clubs urgently need to reverse current trends that see dwindling reserves, and consequently; greater exposure to fluctuations in supply-side costs, lack of ability to absorb shocks, increased need to pass cost increases straight to members, and a lack of ability to invest in their 'offer'. We will now explore how clubs have reported their ability to recover to a healthier financial position.

Clubs are struggling to recover to their pre-pandemic financial position and are exposed to further shocks

As deliverers have emerged from the pandemic and associated lockdowns, they have re-established their ability to generate income, but as inflation bites, so the costs associated with providing sport and physical activity have also risen. This effectively wipes out their ability to create the surpluses needed to recover their level of financial reserves or to invest in their activities.

Figure 2 details the average income and expenditure levels recorded by organisations responding to the survey.

Figure 2 - Income and Expenditure, Actual and Adjusted for Inflation



Figure 2 shows a significant decline in both income and expenditures over the last 12 months, followed by a forecast return to levels only marginally different from before the pandemic. However, when adjusted the net effect is a more significant reduction in income and expenditure, in the last 12 months and only a partial recovery forecast over the year to come. In both the current and future positions, expenditure growth is forecast to match or exceed any projected increases in income, minimising club's ability to generate surpluses and limiting investment.

At first reading (without adjusting the figures for inflation), figure 2 shows that community clubs' average income is currently 82% of pre-pandemic levels; with expenditure having adjusted by the same. Looking at the projected position, unadjusted income will be at 96% of the pre-pandemic position; with expenditure increasing at a faster rate to 3% higher than in 2019.

However, this interpretation presents a slightly misleading picture, because the 'purchasing power' of £1 in 2019 is not the same as at the time of response. Therefore, as an expression of how much clubs' activities are producing and consuming, the above figures need to be adjusted for inflation. At the time the survey was conducted, the Bank of England's calculator shows inflation was 14.2% compared with pre-pandemic prices.

The outcomes of adjusting figures by the rate of inflation can be seen in figure 2. At the time of response, income and expenditure have both been reduced to 72% of pre-pandemic activity. Based on clubs' projections (adjusted for the 14.2% rate of inflation at the time of response) income levels will be 84% of the 2019 figure in real terms, while expenditure will be at 91%.

Any projection of viability assumes that clubs will continue to generate sufficient income to cover their costs. However, it is clear that clubs are experiencing a substantial squeeze on the level of surplus they can produce. For example, analysis of Figure 2 shows that, pre-pandemic, clubs averaged a surplus of £4,503 (around 10.6% of income). For the last 12 months (and in real terms) clubs reported an average surplus of 3,043, a 33% reduction but again around 10% of income. However, for the coming 12 months, the projected real terms surplus clubs expect to make this year is just £1,467; or 4% of income.

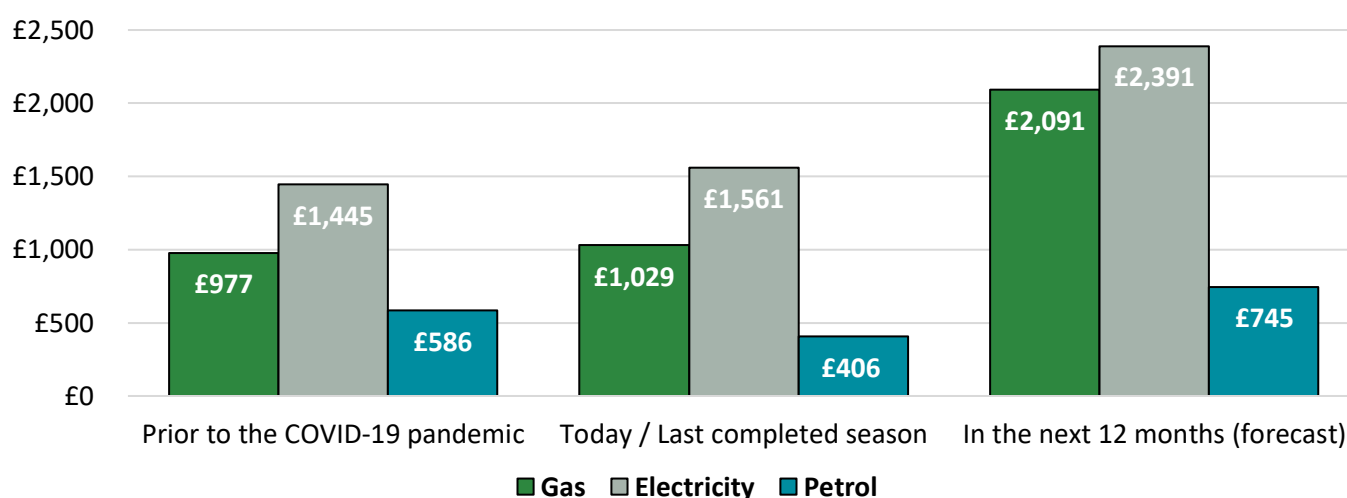
It should be noted, the projected 4% surplus is the 'mean average' position across our sample. To reiterate the evidence presented above, 50% of clubs reported the need to access reserve funds to meet liabilities, an increase from 45%. This means that whilst the average position is effectively a break-even position, 50% of clubs will not meet this threshold and need to dip into their reserves to meet liabilities.

The above analysis shows clearly that will not be able to replenish their reserves and get back to a healthy financial position over the next 12 months. Indeed, it shows how vulnerable clubs are to further shocks to their budgets. The next major question is to establish what is driving this squeeze?

Rising energy costs are a major risk to clubs' future financial health

The recent sharp increases in energy costs, while notable, have not yet fully fed through onto clubs' balance sheets. This is primarily because many organisations that hire facilities agree their rental prices before the start of the playing season, and amid ongoing uncertainty, many operators have not yet passed on the full cost of energy to their users. Figure 3 below shows the average spending expenditure energy reported by clubs and demonstrates that while there were relatively modest increases in gas and electricity costs in the last 12 months, on average clubs spent less on petrol compared with before the pandemic. This may be further confirmation of the reduced level of activity in the last full season, resulting in fewer miles being travelled by participants and volunteers.

Figure 3 - Recorded and Projected Increases in Energy Costs



More ominously, respondents to the survey forecast that their energy costs are likely to increase by almost 80% in the next 12 months, from an average of just over £3,200 to £5,600. Energy costs would then consume 14% of income overall, compared with just 8% before the pandemic. If this happens as predicted, energy price rises will eliminate the greater part of the modest operating surplus enjoyed by most clubs. It is also worth considering that the Energy Bill Relief Scheme (EBRS) support in mitigating energy price increases is only in place until the end of March 2023 and from April, clubs may be exposed to substantial energy cost increases without further support.

It should be noted that the figures presented above represent the average of all the clubs reporting their energy costs in the survey. Energy costs also vary considerably according to circumstance, with clubs in rural areas tending to incur higher bills for gas and electricity than their urban counterparts and forecasting larger price increases over the next 12 months. Similarly, clubs which own, rent or lease their facilities have higher energy costs than those with looser ties to the locations where they train and play. This is thought to be because they have greater levels of liabilities for energy bills.

In summary, the increased cost of energy appears to be either the direct or indirect cause of club's inability to replenish their surpluses to pre-pandemic levels.

The lack of financial headroom means clubs have no choice but to pass on costs to members and participants, at the time they can least afford it

Clubs' responses to the cost of living crisis differ significantly from the adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic, due partly to the enforced nature of the lockdown restrictions which gave organisations little choice but to cease activity. The overriding expectation among those responding to the survey is that rather than needing to reduce expenditure, their members will continue to engage with and pay for the activities they provide. Indeed, many clubs expect that they will need to increase their fees specifically to absorb higher energy costs and that members will be willing to pay to sustain their club's existence.

A breakdown of responses regarding the measures clubs will take to mitigate the need to pass increased costs on to members is provided in figure 4 below.

Figure 4 - Financial Mitigations: Covid-19 and Cost of Living Impacts

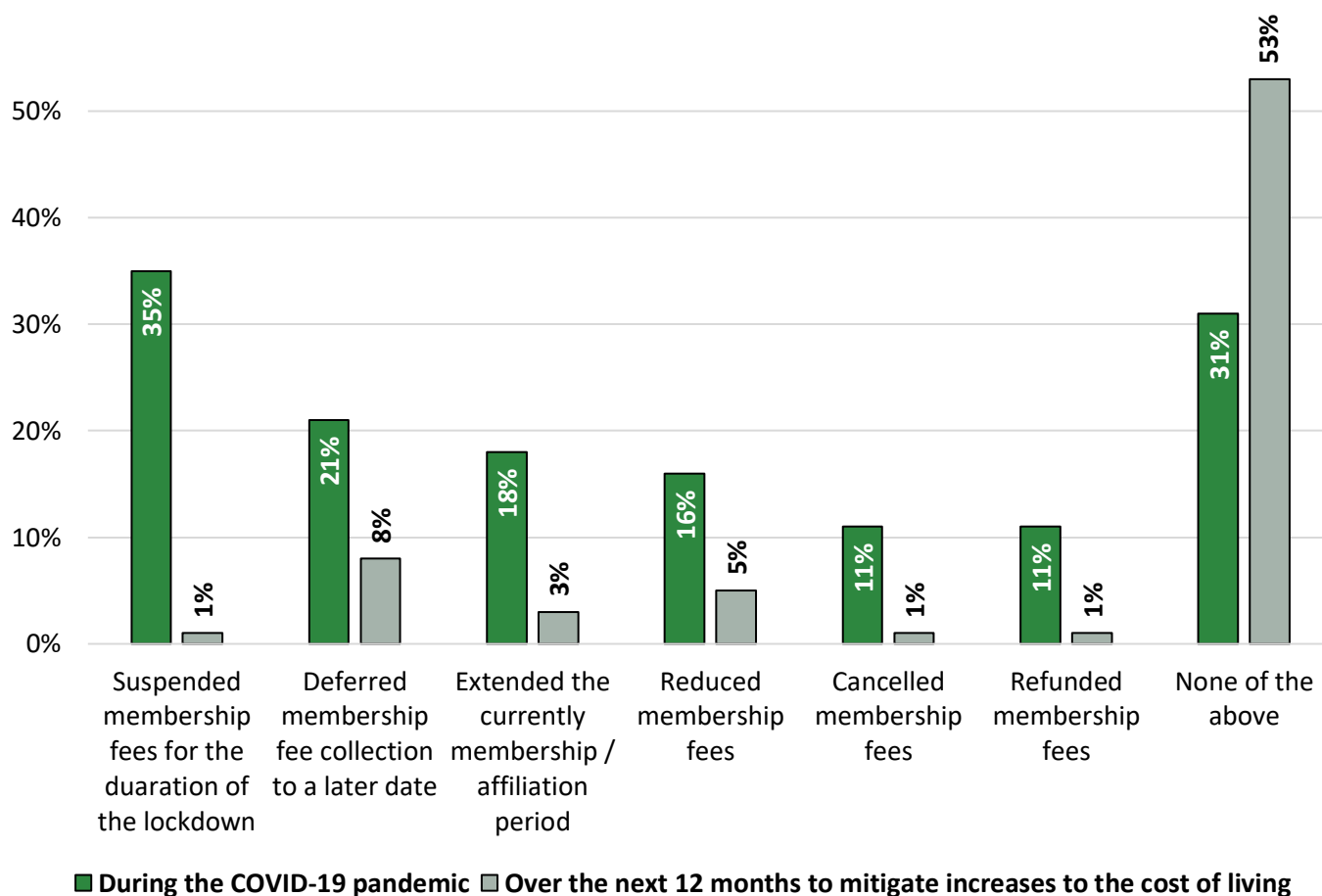
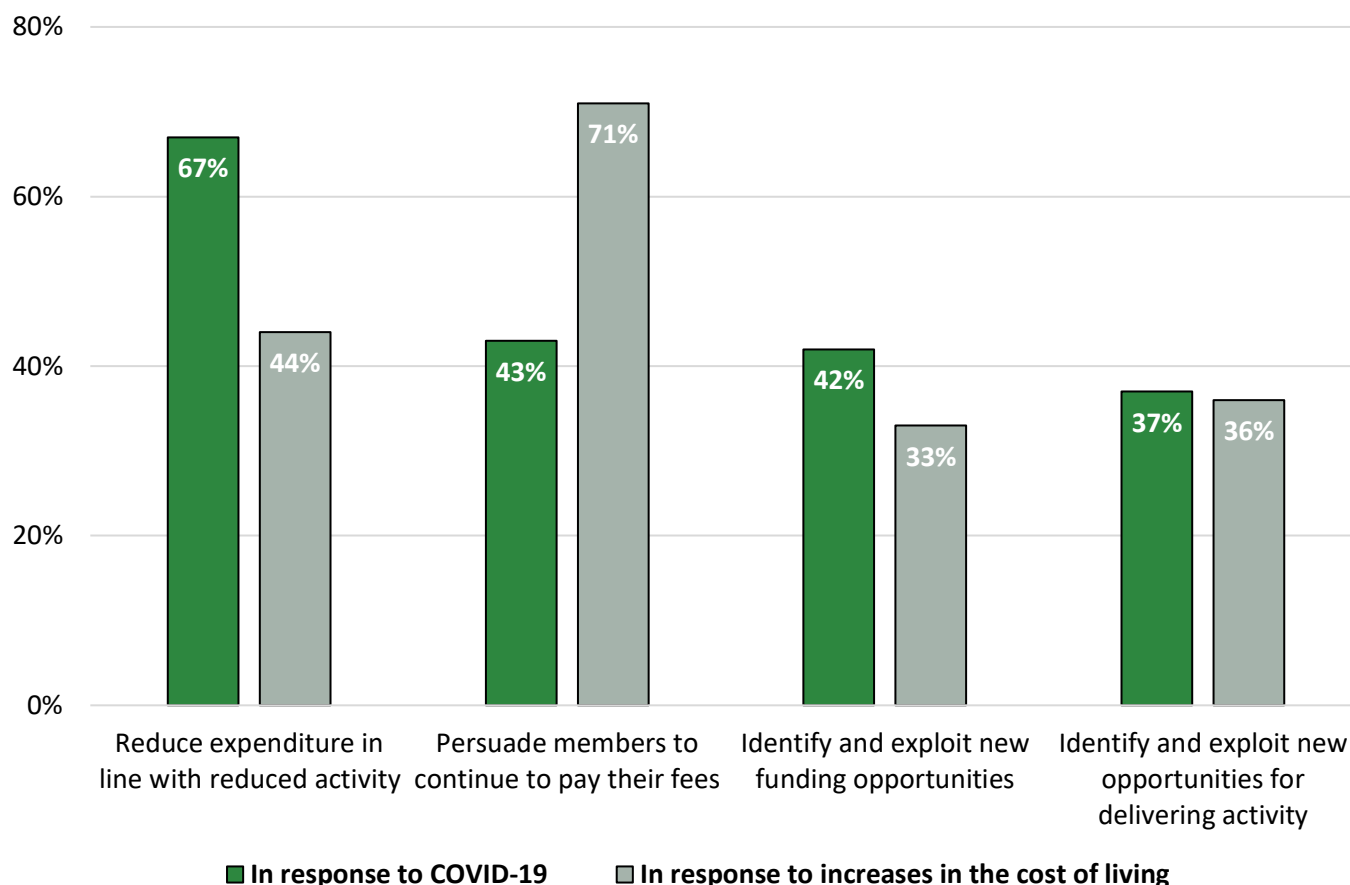


Figure 4 underlines the overwhelming sense among club administrators that increases in the cost of living will not have a negative impact on their ability to generate income to sustain operations. While most clubs took action of some kind to defray membership costs during the pandemic (whether by reducing or suspending fees altogether, or extending the membership period covered by subscriptions), few, if any, are preparing to take similar action in response to challenging economic conditions brought about by higher inflation. Indeed, more than half expect to make no adjustments to membership fees in response to increases in the cost of living.

Figure 5 confirms that in terms of financial mitigation, clubs are likely to respond to increases in the costs of living in a very differently compared with their actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two thirds of clubs reduced expenditure to at least some extent during the pandemic, but only 44% predict that they will do so as inflation takes its toll. In contrast, just over 70% of clubs expect to be able to persuade their members to continue to pay their fees, despite higher prices reducing households' spending power. Fewer than half of all deliverers (43%) were able to collect membership fees continuously during the pandemic. It is also interesting to note that only one in three clubs intends to identify new funding opportunities or change the way they provide their activities, suggesting that they expect to be able to return to tried and trusted methods of delivery.

Figure 5 - Mitigation Responses to Covid-19 and Cost of Living Increase



This optimism seems to be dependent on members or participants household disposable incomes either keeping pace with inflation or allocating greater proportions to their sport and recreation activities. Nevertheless, it is interesting that organisations providing more formal activities reported stronger growth in participation, compared to informal or casual groups (see below). The key strength that sports clubs can draw on as living costs continue to rise is their ability to support the mental health and wellbeing of their members by maintaining personal networks and increasing social capital.

The results of the survey suggest that a majority of clubs and other providers have not yet considered exploring new avenues for generating additional income. Similarly, few clubs are as yet attempting to find long-term sustainable ways to reduce energy costs by diversifying supply (i.e. installing renewable sources) or reducing demand (by installing LED floodlighting system for example). However, such investments take time and often involve large-scale up-front capital costs, although these may be recouped over time. With the range and scale of the issues currently confronting clubs and other providers, it may well be the case that, for the time being at least, other matters are given higher priority.

This assumption is becoming increasingly open to question however, with households facing difficult economic decisions, and there is evidence to suggest that some participant groups are choosing to trim spending on participation in sport and leisure activities². This should be expected to feed through to the financial bottom line of organisations providing sport and physical opportunities at a time of substantial financial exposure; either through reduced income due to fewer participants/members or increased costs as paid coaching is needed to replace reduced volunteer capacity (see below).

The challenge for clubs and other deliverers will be to keep costs sufficiently under control while they continue to generate income from existing members and attempt to identify new funding streams to plug the gap. Voluntary clubs in particular will be keen to avoid passing on any increased costs to members who are experiencing the impacts of household inflation.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/63309236>, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-63305843>

The financial position and lack of room for manoeuvre is making it harder for clubs to provide active opportunities to their communities

One of the interesting innovations in the 2021 survey was the development of a new measure of voluntary club capacity, which identified the total number of ‘active minutes’ offered by a deliverer as a means of benchmarking participation opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity. The results are shown below in Figure 5.

Figure 6 - Participation Opportunities per Organisation (minutes per week), by Tenure Type

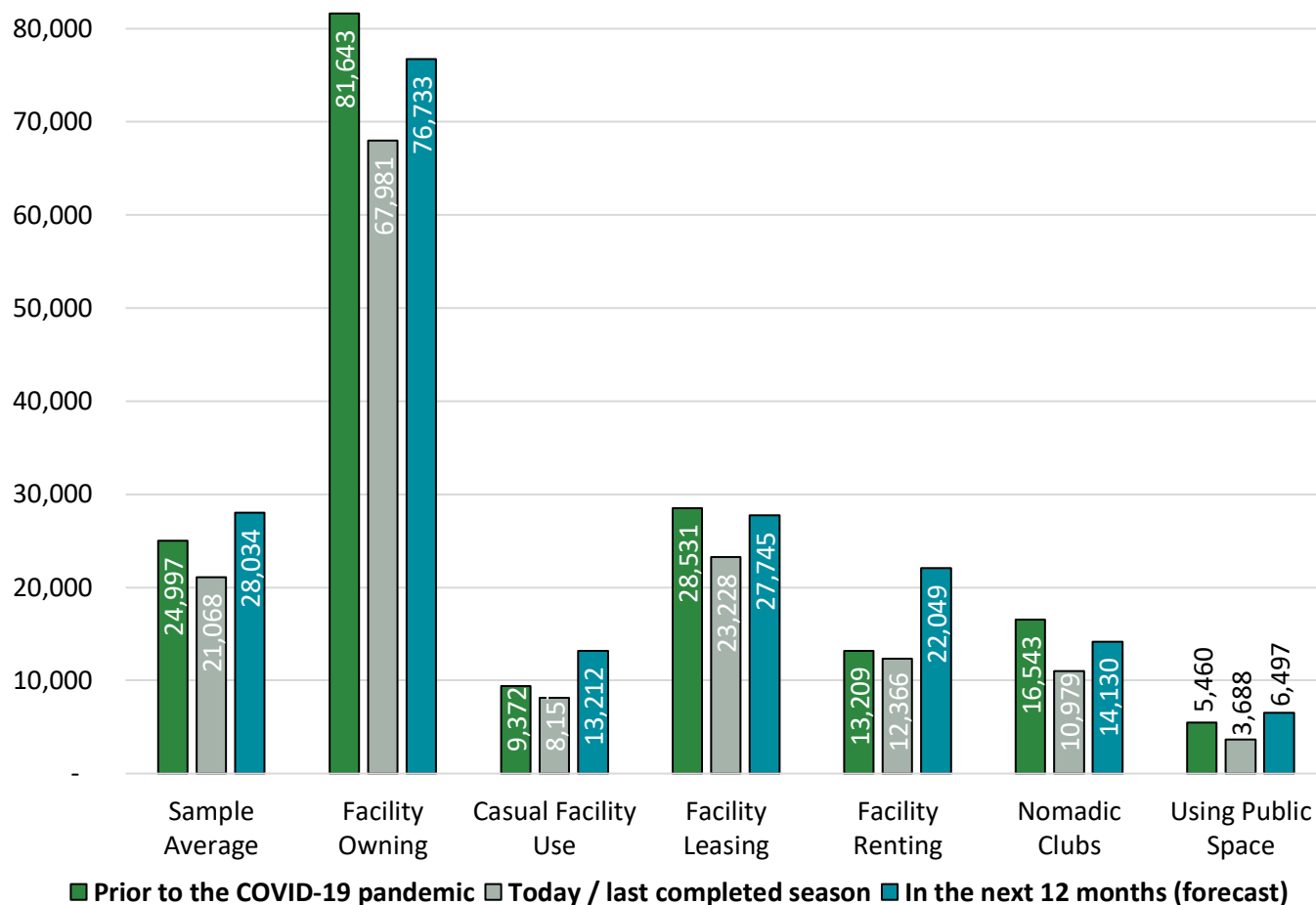


Figure 5 shows that respondents to the survey indicated that the total amount of participation opportunities offered by their organisation fell by 16% last year in comparison with 2019 (the last year before the pandemic).

This is a particularly interesting finding since the prediction in the 2021 survey was that participation opportunities would fall by 10% once lockdown restrictions were removed. This indicates clubs have had a harder time recovering from the pandemic than they expected. This is likely to have been caused by a number of factors including the availability of facilities, coaches and other volunteer support.

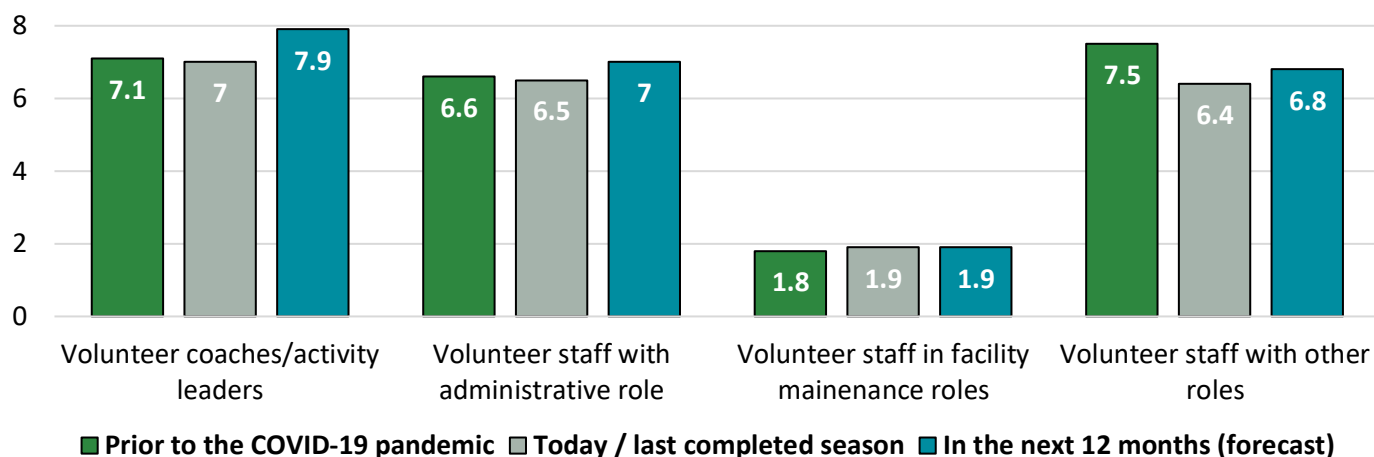
Crucially, there is early evidence from the survey to suggest that clubs and other deliverers are monitoring facility hire costs closely and avoiding ‘non-essential’ bookings. Thus, while the participation opportunities on offer may have declined slightly, the survey suggests that clubs are making more efficient use of the available time. Notably however, participation opportunities are forecast to increase by 15% in the next 12 months, which would represent a return to pre-pandemic levels, though this is a projection and heavily dependent on the availability of facilities and the careful management of income and expenditure (more on this below).

Figure 5 also provides segmentations based on clubs’ relationship with facilities. Asset-owning clubs are shown to produce around 3.25 times the level of activity of the average. This is thought to be because asset-owning clubs are by their nature more established in their communities. Over the past 12 months, these clubs have been worse hit than the average, at an 18% reduction in the active minutes they produce. Further, in contrast to other club types, asset-owning clubs project that by the end of this year, the amount of activity they deliver will be 6% below pre-pandemic levels. Again, this is below the projections of other types of club. Given the contribution of asset-owning clubs to their communities, the above appears to indicate that these are in greater need of strategic support.

Despite challenging circumstances club volunteers remain resilient and dedicated in providing active opportunities to their communities

Many community clubs are heavily dependent on volunteers to support the delivery of their activity. Despite the challenges of the pandemic and of those emerging over the next 12 months, volunteers seem to remain ready and willing to support their clubs. Figure 6, below, shows the number of volunteers supporting clubs has remained steady, and is even projected to increase next year.

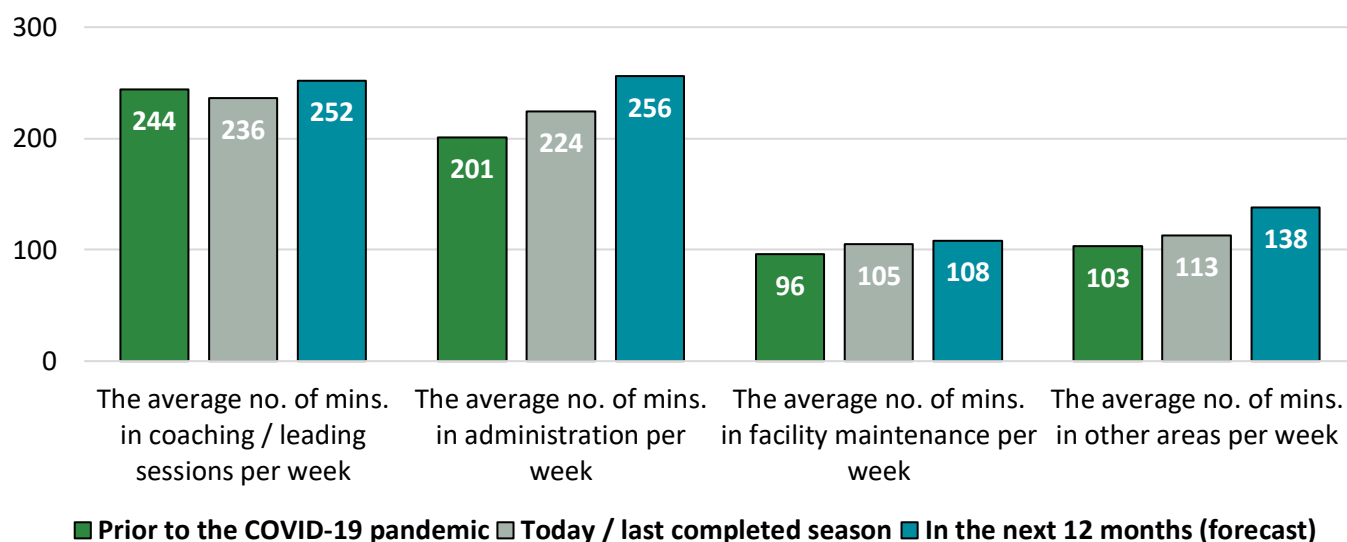
Figure 7 - Volunteer Workforce Size per Organisation, by Volunteer Role



Encouragingly, the survey results show not only that volunteer losses due to the pandemic were lower than feared, but also that organisations are preparing to expand their unpaid workforce over the next 12 months, particularly in terms of the coaches and administrators who underpin provision in the community. It remains to be seen however, whether voluntary sports clubs be able to follow through on these intentions, given the continued pressure on disposable income and the time commitment required of individuals.

Figure 7, above, shows how it is not just the number of volunteers, but also the amount of time they are prepared to give that has remained resilient to environmental challenges. The figure uses a measure of 'volunteer minutes' to aggregate how much time is given per week.

Figure 8 - Volunteering Minutes per Week



The amount of time individuals give to volunteering has increased in all roles by around 10%, with the exception of coaching (-3%), in the last year (Figure 8). Further increases in volunteer time are expected over the year to come, particularly in administration (27%) compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Taken across all areas of volunteering, figure 7 shows that, pre-pandemic, the average club received 644 minutes of volunteering per week (10hrs 44mins). Despite the challenges of the last 12 months, this figure rose to 11hrs and 18

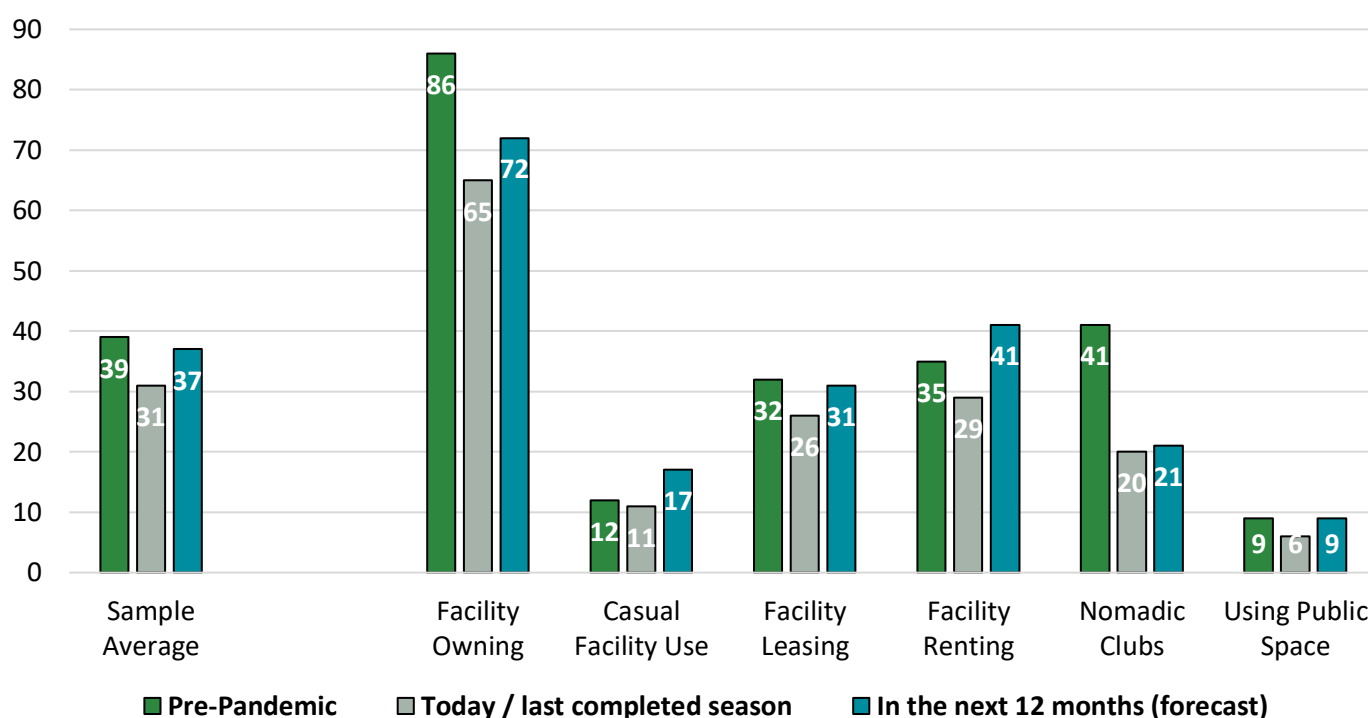
minutes per week. Clubs project that over the next 12 months, they will receive 12hrs and 34 minutes of volunteering per week.

In the context of a return to pre-pandemic levels of activity, this forecast increase in the amount of time committed to volunteering highlights the dependence of the sector on its unpaid workforce. Further, it underlines the need to for organisations to continuously recruit new volunteers and retain existing individuals to maintain both the quantity and more importantly the quality of participation opportunities that they provide.

Protecting morale of 'gold dust' volunteers must be a priority

In our previous report we introduced the concept of 'active minutes' and 'volunteer minutes' as viable means of comparing clubs' delivery of sport and physical activity and demonstrated that as a unit of club capacity, the number of minutes per week was an effective output measure. In this analysis, we have extended this to factor in the amount of volunteer time required to deliver participation opportunities, by exploring the ratio between the two. The result is a figure which might be considered an indicator of social capital, and Figure 8 demonstrates how this metric varies over time and between club types.

Figure 9 - Participation Opportunities (minutes per week) per Volunteering Minute, by Tenure Type



The survey data show that for every minute of volunteer time, the average club delivered nearly 40 minutes of participation opportunities prior to the onset of Covid-19. This figure fell to 31 minutes in the last 12 months but is forecast to recover close to the pre-pandemic level of 37 minutes (assuming that predictions of participation and volunteering are accurate). Most notably, it is asset-owning clubs which are the most 'productive' in terms of participation opportunities per unit of volunteer time, at more than twice the average level for the clubs in the survey. Conversely, clubs using facilities on a pay-to-play basis and those using public space generate far fewer participation opportunities per unit of volunteer time. It should be noted that for asset-owning clubs, which produce 3.25x the activity of the average club, the situation is more acute. Pre-pandemic, 1 minute of volunteering produced 86 minutes of activity. Whereas, over the last 12 months, this has reduced to 65 minutes (a 25% reduction).

Further analysis of volunteering input shows that coaching and administration each account for one third of the unpaid input to clubs and other deliverers, with the remainder split between facility management and other volunteering roles. In asset-owning clubs however, between a quarter and a third of all volunteering supports facility maintenance, underlining that these clubs face a different kind of pressure in delivering their activities, requiring a different set of volunteer skills.

We should be concerned that the manifest reduction of 'return' for volunteers' time and effort may damage their enthusiasm to continue volunteering (especially in an economic climate that makes volunteering harder).

Access to facilities is top concern

We asked clubs in about the elements of factors that most limited their ability to continue to provide ‘active opportunities’ to their communities. The percentage of respondents to report a factor as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ is provided in Figure 10, below.

Figure 10 - Potential Factors Limiting Activity

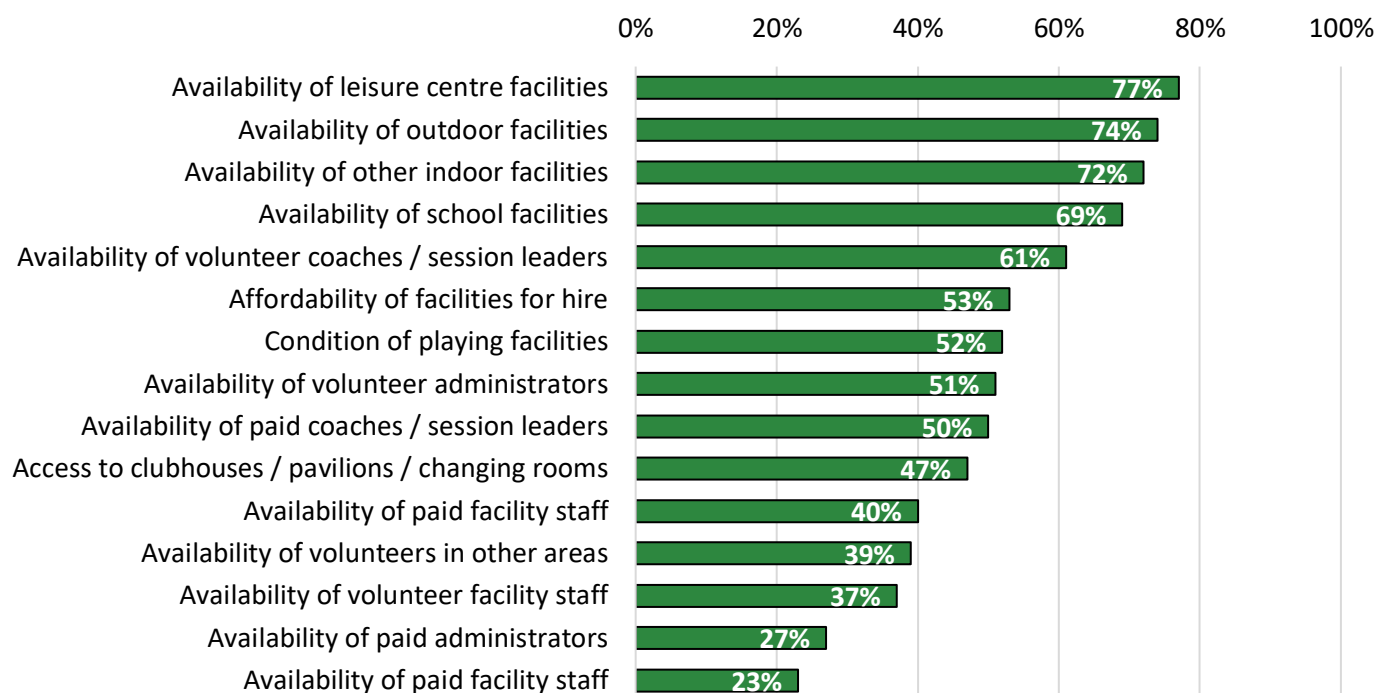


Figure 9 shows that by far the most important factor reported by respondents is their continued access to facilities. This is a repeat of the trends identified in the 2021 research. Organisations which own the facilities they use are very much in the minority, with 66% of clubs and other providers using rented or leased facilities and a further 18% dependent upon public space (parks, roads and waterways).

Closures or restrictions on access to public facilities or spaces therefore pose an existential threat to many clubs and the participation they offer. The survey respondents expressed particular concern at the possibility of local authorities closing or reducing the opening hours of sports centres and swimming pools or limiting the use of floodlights on outdoor pitches. Indeed, these anxieties have been reported widely in the media over recent months, with teams and leagues in some professional and semi-professional sports proposing to move kick-off times or training sessions to take place in daylight.

To illustrate the above, recent research by ukactive highlights that forty per cent of council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centres and swimming pools within five months, or seeing services rationalised, due to the growing energy crisis³. This follows additional research which shows that energy costs for public leisure facilities are estimated to have risen from a sector total of £500m in 2019 to between £1.0bn-£1.2bn in 2022. In 2023 bills are forecast to rise by 185% compared to 2021⁴.

In October, and complementary to this research, Sported released a report on a survey of its members on the financial challenges faced by their members in accessing facilities in light of the cost of living crisis and how they are responding to them⁵. The findings show that across all groups, a significant majority of respondents are concerned about increases to the cost of accessing facilities.

³ <https://www.ukactive.com/news/forty-per-cent-of-council-areas-at-risk-of-leisure-centre-and-swimming-pool-closures-and-restrictions-before-april-without-immediate-support/>

⁴ <https://www.ukactive.com/news/sector-leaders-call-for-urgent-action-from-government-as-energy-costs-put-leisure-facilities-and-pools-at-risk-of-closure-within-six-months/>

⁵ https://sported.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Member-Survey-June-2022-Facilities-Comparison-by-access-type.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=membersurvey_facilities

⁶ <https://www.sportengland.org/news/why-investing-physical-activity-great-our-health-and-our-nation>

About the Sport and Recreation Alliance

The Sport and Recreation Alliance believes that the power of sport and recreation can change lives and bring communities together. Together with over 300 members and in partnership with the wider sector, we make the most of opportunities and tackle the areas that provide a challenge.

We deliver advice, support and guidance to our members and the sector, who represent traditional governing bodies of games and sport, active partnerships, outdoor recreation, water pursuits, and movement and dance exercise.

As the voice of the sector, we work with Government, policy makers and the media to make sure grassroots sport and recreation grows and thrives. Having an active nation is important as it delivers huge benefits to society and the millions of participants, volunteers, staff and spectators.

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About Sheffield Hallam University Sport Industry Research Centre

The Sport Industry Research Centre is a team of full-time researchers who apply principles of economics, management science, and social science to solve real world problems and deliver positive social impacts. We are outward looking and pride ourselves in doing policy-relevant research that delivers actionable insights for our clients. Our research has pioneered the use of economics in sport, notably:

- calculating the value of sport to the economy,
- measuring the economic impact of major sports events, and
- valuing the wider social impacts achieved by sport.

We apply our extensive skill set in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research to meet the needs of the outside world.

SPORT:80 

About Sport:80

Sport:80 is a leading sport business management technology specialists whose solutions are trusted by sports organisations around the globe. The company's flagship product, the Sport:80 Platform, is a sophisticated yet easy-to-use Managed SaaS solution that combines both sports business management and member-facing functionality. It is the ideal tool to capture, manage, analyse, and leverage the diverse information collected by sports organisations.



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