



2025-2035

Getting Active, Staying Active

A Leisure Strategy for Ards and North Down
where everyone can enjoy an active life



**Ards and
North Down**
Borough Council

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Why We Need a Leisure Strategy	3
3. Finding Out	8
4. Living Better, Living Longer	19
5. The Strategy	22
6. What Next?	33

1. Introduction

Getting Active, Staying Active

This is the first leisure strategy for Ards and North Down Borough. Within the strategy 'leisure' is taken to mean *active leisure – anything that includes exercise*. This includes sport and physical activity whether it's enjoyed as a group or by individuals either indoors or outdoors, everything from recreational walking to competing with a team. Creating the strategy has brought together a wide range of groups and organisations and gathered the views of around 1,600 residents. The strategy's vision, Getting Active, Staying Active, encourages everyone to be more active – no-one is left out. Consultation and research tell us that we need to be better at supporting people with the *most to gain from being active* and the need to encourage people to remain active throughout their life.

The Ards and North Down area is in the east of Northern Ireland. The urban areas are Bangor City, Newtownards, Holywood, Comber, Donaghadee and Portaferry with many smaller villages and hamlets making up the area's population of 164,000. With around 115 miles of attractive coastline on the southern shore of Belfast Lough and most of Strangford Lough the area is a popular place to live in and visit. Ards and North Down Borough Council is leading the preparation of Getting Active, Staying Active which will be implemented in partnership with statutory organisations and activity provider groups throughout the Borough.

In Ards and North Down there are many opportunities to enjoy active leisure at indoor and outdoor facilities provided by the Council, by commercial operators and by voluntary and community providers. Getting Active, Staying Active embraces all the providers of active leisure opportunities, however, it is the Council that provides the most opportunities for active leisure, many of which are available in these facilities:

- ❖ Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex
- ❖ Bangor Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex
- ❖ Bangor Sportsplex
- ❖ Queen's Leisure Complex, Holywood
- ❖ Comber Leisure Centre
- ❖ Portaferry Sports Centre
- ❖ Outdoor sports and recreation facilities

Annually, the Council's leisure facilities attract around 2 million visits, a mix of casual users and people engaging in coached sessions and activities. Add to this the thousands of sessions delivered by other providers and the multitude of opportunities for informal outdoor activities and it's clear to see that many people in Ards and North Down enjoy being active. Yet, like every other Council area, there are health inequalities in Ards and North Down¹ depending on where people live, seen in life expectancy at birth:

¹ *Health Inequalities: Annual Report 2024. Department of Health.*

Life Expectancy at birth in ANDBC		
	Borough-Wide	In 20% most deprived areas
Male	80.0 years	77.2 years
Female	82.9 years	81.0 years

The largest inequality gaps between the 20% most and least deprived areas are found in smoking during pregnancy, preventable deaths and hospital admissions linked to drugs, alcohol and self-harm. Encouraging and enabling more people to get active and stay active can help reduce these and other health-related inequalities.

It is those people, at whatever age who are presently inactive or not active enough who will benefit most from becoming active and remaining active throughout their lives. There are still sections of society oblivious to the *message* of the benefits of an active lifestyle or for whom the *barriers* to being active are too great. This challenge is emphasised by Sport England:²

‘For many people sport and activity is not part of everyday life. Even more so now than before the pandemic, opportunities to get involved in sport activity – and to reap the rewards of being active – depend too much on your background, your gender, your bank balance and postcode. Helping to remove the barriers to activity has never been more important.’

It’s clear that the leisure sector’s social conscience has been awakened and that its important role as a contributor to addressing wider societal challenges has been recognised. The operation of leisure services is transitioning from its traditional role solely as a facilitator to becoming an *active wellbeing* service. Embracing this shift is critical to the development and implementation of the Getting Active, Staying Active leisure strategy as it sets out to fulfil its potential and make an appreciable difference in the lives of everyone in Ards and North Down, especially those who need it the most.

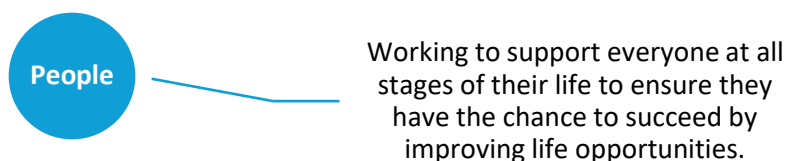
² *Future of public sector leisure. Sport England 2022.*

2. Why We Need a Leisure Strategy

Leisure providers in Ards and North Down do a great job in making active leisure opportunities available, through facilities and programmes, to those in our community who want to be active. Research confirms the positive effect of active leisure on wellbeing, individual development, community and social development.³ In recent years active leisure operations have demonstrated how they can help in addressing a range of health conditions including diabetes, some cancers and mental wellbeing. Councils can lead the way in this work but it is only by working in effective partnership with a wide range of statutory and community organisations that more people can enjoy the benefits of active lifestyles. Scientists now suggest, *'We can self-engineer genetic changes to help prevent diseases and boost longevity. Each healthy act switches on youth-promoting genes and switches off ageing genes.'*⁴ Recognition of the connection between engaging in active leisure and positive health outcomes has never been stronger, as demonstrated in these regional and local strategies.

Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. Draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027

PfG sets out *'an ambitious agenda of change for Northern Ireland; we will make it happen by working in partnership. It is about doing what matters most today and shaping a better tomorrow, together.'* One of PfG's four Missions is:



Within the People Mission PfG recognises that *'people from more deprived areas are more likely to suffer from poor physical and mental health, are less likely to be active in their community and are more likely to be the victim of a crime.'* In addressing this inequality PfG will *'... prioritise sports and physical activity to tackle obesity, which currently costs our health service £500 million each year. These efforts will be tailored to reflect the needs of our increasingly diverse and ageing population. Our investments in new outdoor recreation and sporting facilities will help to ensure we provide quality and modern focal points for our communities and that we can help people to enjoy active social lives.'*

Active Living: The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland. Department for Communities 2022

The vision set out in Active Living is one which all leisure providers can relate to:

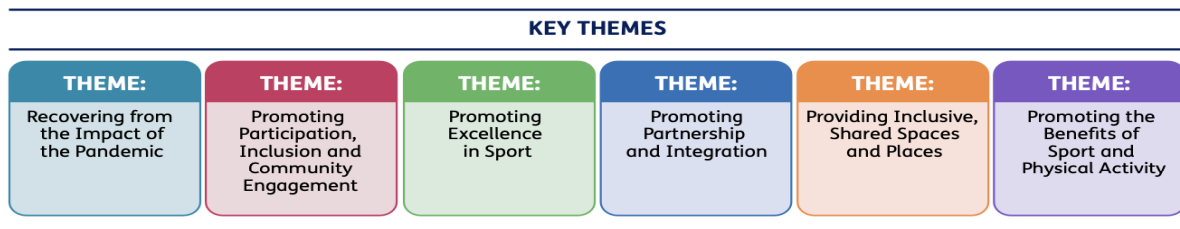
'Lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity will deliver on an active, healthy, resilient and inclusive society which recognises and values both participation and excellence.'

³ *Future of Public Sector Leisure. Sport England 2022.*

⁴ *The Great Age Reboot; Michael Roizen.*

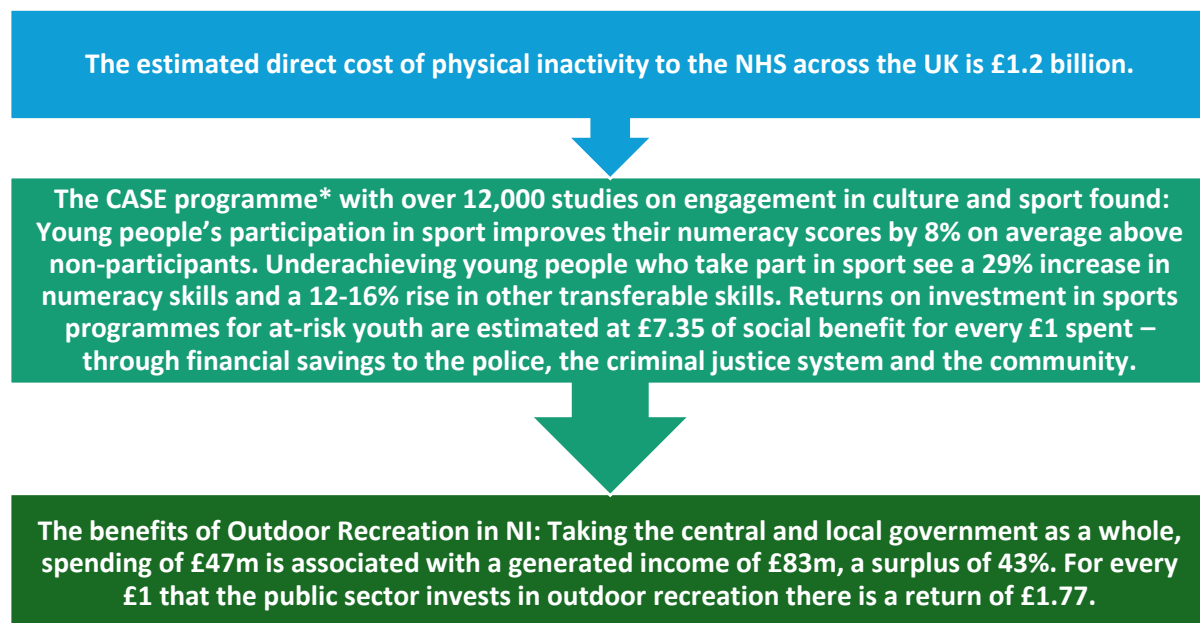
The challenge for Ards and North Down in contributing to this vision is made clear in Active Living’s objective: *‘inclusion, engagement, community, excellence, partnership, collaboration and shared spaces that collectively maximise the benefits of more people being more active more of the time.’*

Active Living’s six key themes resonate with Getting Active, Staying Active as the whole community is considered and there is encouragement for greater levels of physical activity for a broad range of people.



The Power of Sport: Sport NI Corporate Plan 2021-2026

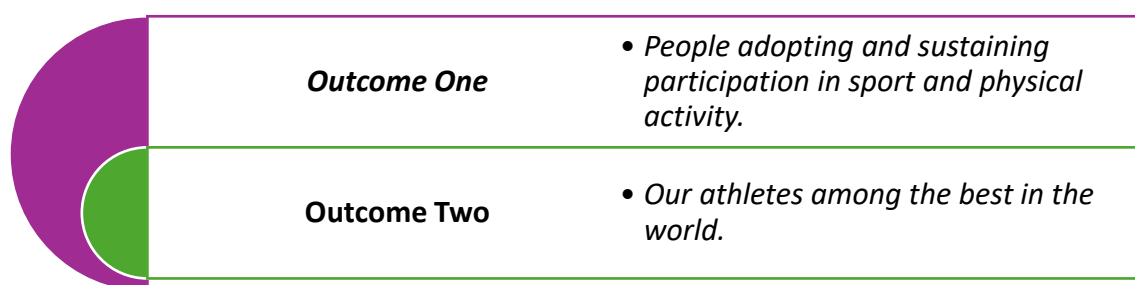
The Power of Sport highlights the ‘compelling story of the value of sport’ in recent research.



** The Culture and Sport Evidence (CASE) research programme in England led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.*

The Power of Sport emphasises that *‘Sport NI is more committed than ever to removing barriers to sport and physical activity. For some, the routes into local sports clubs are not always easy or clear, yet our research and engagement insights tell us that the most likely indicator for sustained participation in sport and physical activity has increased in recent years, yet there still remains a significant gap from overall participation rates to those of women, people with a disability or those living in the most deprived areas. Sport NI wants to address the barriers and create opportunities for those underrepresented groups to be more active and to close that gap by making equality and inclusion an integral part of this corporate plan.’*

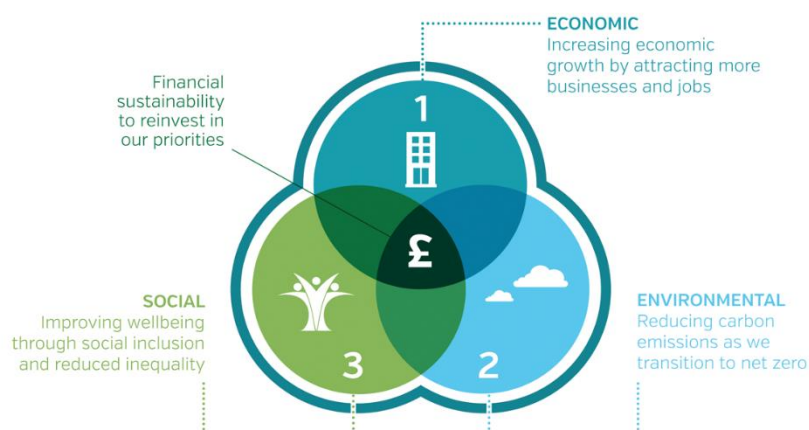
The Power of Sport has two strategic outcomes:



A Sustainable Borough: Corporate Plan 2024-2028. Ards and North Down Borough Council

The Council's vision of A Sustainable Borough is one 'where economic, environmental and social wellbeing are interdependent and decisions that are taken are well-balanced and fair.'

The Corporate Plan has 3 priorities, 7 outcomes, 17 strategic actions and measures of success. The 3 priorities are:



Whilst it is the **Social** priority that Getting Active, Staying Active will mostly influence, it will also contribute to increasing economic growth by helping to grow employment opportunities including public sector leisure staff, sports coaches, fitness instructors, personal trainers, administrators. Improving wellbeing, that is, people having better physical and mental health, will help economic growth by strengthening the labour force and improving people's livelihoods. Investing in getting people active has been shown to improve educational attainment, reduce crime and increase consumer expenditure and employment opportunities, contributing to a healthier and happier society; for every £1 spent on physical activity and sport it's estimated that £3.91 of value is generated.⁵

Of the Corporate Plan's 7 outcomes it is **Outcome 6: Opportunities for people to be active and healthy** that is directly relatable to Getting Active, Staying Active with two strategic actions:

- ❖ Improving physical and mental wellbeing for people of all abilities.
- ❖ Encouraging active and sustainable travel.

⁵ Sport England 2020.

Outcome 1: An engaged Borough with citizens and businesses who have opportunities to influence the delivery of services, plans and investment is also a key driver to delivery of the strategy.

The Big Plan: Ards and North Down Strategic Community Planning Partnership

The Big Plan is Ards and North Down's Community Plan. It has this objective:

'Creating positive outcomes for everyone by empowering individuals and communities to be more resilient; reducing inequality; promoting good relations and sustainability; while at the same time improving the quality and accessibility of all public services is at the heart of the Big Plan for Ards and North Down.'

The Big Plan's five outcomes, similar to other regional and local strategies, emphasise the need for agencies and organisations to work together to achieve the full potential of shared outcomes. Outcome 2 states 'All people in Ards and North Down enjoy good health and wellbeing.'

Age Friendly Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2027: Ards and North Down Strategic Community Planning Partnership

Becoming Age Friendly is a priority for the area, not least because Ards and North Down's population has a bigger percentage of older people than the Northern Ireland average. The term Age Friendly means a community where *'people of all ages can live healthy and active lives and where everyone is treated with respect, regardless of their age.'* This clearly resonates with Getting Active, Staying Active as Age Friendly, whilst focusing on over 50s, is inclusive of all ages.

The four-year Age Friendly action plan prioritises three of the World Health Organisation's age friendly themes:



The action plan is being delivered by the Age Friendly Alliance, a partnership of public, community and voluntary organisations.


A Whole Systems Approach to Obesity in Ards and North Down: Ards and North Down Strategic Community Planning Partnership

A Whole Systems Approach (WSA) puts in place a collaborative approach to addressing obesity, *'where a multi-agency and partnership approach is adopted.'* Working with the Public Health Agency, Ards and North Down is the first early adopter site in taking a WSA approach to obesity in Northern Ireland.

Local analysis highlights the *'strong relationship between deprivation and childhood obesity'*, stating that *'obesity prevalence in the most deprived 10% of children is approximately twice that of the least deprived 10%.'* The approach to addressing obesity levels is complex, however, encouraging everyone to engage in active leisure is an important part of the approach.


Play Strategy 2021-2032: Ards and North Down Borough Council

Play and children's active leisure share benefits that the Play Strategy highlights:




Physical Benefits and Wellbeing

- Maintains healthy weight to combat childhood obesity
- Play, recreation and sport contribute to healthy growth and development



Mental Health and Cognitive Development

- Play contributes to a child's self esteem alongside emotional and physical wellbeing and their development




Community Benefits

- Play offers opportunities for social interaction for the wider community
- Families benefit from safe, healthier and happier children


Active play comprises a diverse range of activities for different play experiences according to age and ability, including climbing, swinging, sliding, balancing, crawling, rocking, spinning, etc. Getting Active, Staying Active complements these and other aspects of active play by offering opportunities for organised activities such as are found in activity programmes delivered by a range of providers and in a range of settings.

Summary


Here's what we learn from these regional and local approaches:




Obesity levels are a challenging health issue. Through the Ards and North Down Strategic Community Planning Partnership a Whole Systems Approach to addressing obesity is being formulated. A leisure strategy can play a part by creating opportunities for greater levels of participation in physical activity by everyone regardless of age.



A multi-disciplinary partnership approach is important. Each of the regional and local strategies emphasise a partnership approach to implementing Borough-wide actions. The challenge for the leisure strategy is establishing effective partnerships on a number of levels that share responsibility for delivery.



There needs to be a focus on older people, on children and on females. It is important that children engage in physical activity to experience the many benefits that will stand by them in adulthood. As people age and have more leisure time they need to have age-specific activity opportunities to remain active. Girls and women are underrepresented in active leisure.



Living in areas of deprivation can impact on levels of physical activity, resulting in poorer health. There is a need to better understand the barriers to participating and learn how to address them.

3. Finding Out

Getting Active, Staying Active started by finding out about active leisure opportunities in the Borough by speaking with and listening to groups and organisations who deliver opportunities and people who participate in them.

Community Sports Clubs and Groups in Ards and North Down

There are around 150 community sports clubs and groups delivering active leisure opportunities across the Borough. Around 20,000 people or 12% of Ards and North Down's population are involved in these clubs and groups, people of all ages and abilities. With around 100 different sports and activities represented across all the clubs and groups, ranging from angling to volleyball, disability sports to pickleball, there's a sport or activity to suit everyone.

In people's minds 'sport' usually conjures up competition, either as a team or as an individual. However, the community sports clubs' main purpose in Ards and North Down is primarily *participation and fun*, then competition. Sports clubs and groups are constantly evolving in recognition of how they contribute to their local communities; as Sport NI says,

'Sport changes lives and we know of its enduring ability to support health and wellbeing, education attainment, cohesive communities and instil pride in our region.'

Whether the activity has a high profile or is less well known, all 150 community sports clubs and groups in Ards and North Down have a part to play in Getting Active, Staying Active. Their focus is on *'creating health and wellbeing opportunities for people of all abilities.'*⁶

There are nearly twice as many males as females in the community sports clubs and groups, however, this gap is closing as more girls and women get involved as participants and as coaches and administrators; around 4,500 people are volunteers in the sports clubs and groups, nearly half of whom are females. People volunteer mostly because they *'love the sport'*, they *'want to give something back'* and they *'have a child involved in the club/group.'* Half of the volunteers are aged 19 to 49 years and a third are over 50 years. This age profile, coupled with the top reasons why people volunteer, highlights the community nature of sports clubs and groups; the social aspect clearly adds to the activity. Looking at coaches there are 1,100 coaches involved, of whom about 40% are female.

The Borough's community sports clubs and groups are well organised with most – but not all – having the essential policies and procedures for community organisations such as insurances, a constitution, safeguarding code of conduct and safety procedures. Perhaps surprisingly only about half have policies on members' health and wellbeing and on volunteers whilst less than half have a development plan in

⁶ Club Survey 2019/20. A Headline Report for Ards and North Down. Sports NI.

place. However, by their very nature they have a positive attitude and a passion for what they do and how they help people. Thinking ahead, they aspire to:

- ❖ Increase participation, especially females and young people.
- ❖ Grow social aspects to enhance mental wellbeing.
- ❖ Ensure members enjoy being part of the club.
- ❖ Be financially secure.
- ❖ Have greater awareness of 'minority' sports.

Rhys McClenaghan

Rhys first tried gymnastics at the old Ards Leisure Centre. He loved learning new skills and how to move his body in ways he didn't think were possible. At age eight he started to really focus on gymnastics, a decision motivated by his ambitions for the future. Early in his career his Russian coach sparked his love for gymnastics. At age 14 he started working with his current coach Luke Carson who turned Rhys into the world's best. Rhys says:



Rhys celebrating his Gold medal for his Pommel Horse routine at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games

'Sport is a great learning experience for any walk of life. Being active and involved in sport develops skills and strategies in children's minds that they can use in whatever they do in the future. Teaching children that failure is a part of success and not to be discouraged by difficult activities but to welcome them is essential in anything they do. Creating a community to encourage as many children and adults to participate in physical activity will improve quality of life. Less illness, stronger bodies and improved mental health will be the outcome of a community driven to regularly exercising and/or participating in sport. This is why it is essential to encourage as many people as possible to pursue a physical activity which they enjoy.'

Community Survey

The survey of the Borough's residents attracted an impressive 1,564 responses. This level of response, a great deal higher than anticipated is significant as it emphasises the importance that people living in Ards and North Down attach to leisure provision. The survey questionnaire asked residents about how active they are, the activities they do, what they think about leisure provision and how important it is to them, the barriers they encounter to being active and lots more.

Age

The biggest proportion of respondents lies in the 35 years to 54 years age bracket, accounting for 43% of total respondents. However, this is closely followed by the 55 years to 74 years age bracket which accounts for 39% of total responses. The younger age bracket accounts for only 13% of total responses.

Age Bracket	No of Responses	%
16yrs – 34yrs	199	13%
35yrs – 54yrs	669	43%
55yrs – 74yrs	604	39%
74yrs plus	92	5%
Total	1,564	100%

The respondents' age profile may reflect the age profile of the Borough's residents; from 2011 to 2021 the percentage of the Borough's population over 65 years rose from 18% to 22%.

Disability/Long-Term Illness

In the provision of leisure services it's important to be aware of the percentage of the population living with a disability or long-term condition so that they can be supported in being active. Whilst 83% of respondents do not have a disability or long-term condition, 13% reported that they do.⁷ A total of 121 respondents provided some detail on the nature of their condition. These include mobility issues, chronic conditions (eg, Parkinson's, MS, Diabetes, Fibromyalgia, Rheumatoid Arthritis), respiratory/cardiovascular conditions, visual and auditory impairments, cancer survivors and autism spectrum disorders.

Frequency

Nearly three quarters (71%) of respondents engage in active leisure either daily or several times each week. However, the remaining 29% are fairly inactive:

Weekly	18%
Monthly	4%
Rarely	6%
Never	1%

Getting Active, Staying Active aims to make a difference by *engaging the inactive* so that more people meet the World Health Organisation's recommendation of 150 minutes of active leisure each week to benefit health and wellbeing. Given that 99.9% of respondents agree with '*enjoying leisure activities can benefit and improve my general health and wellbeing*' there is a substantial difference between knowing about the benefits and being sufficiently active to get the benefits. This is a key driver for Getting Active, Staying Active.

⁷ The remainder chose not to respond.

Leisure Activities

Respondents were asked to list the leisure activity they had participated in within the previous year; here are the most popular activities.⁸

Activity	All Respondents	Most Popular Age	Most Popular Gender
Walking for recreation	58%	55yrs and over	Female
Swimming or diving	37%	35 to 54yrs	Female
Keepfit, Aerobics, Yoga	35%	55yrs and over	Female
Jogging/Running	28%	35 to 54yrs	Male
Weight training/lifting	27%	16 to 34yrs	Male
Cycling	23%	35 to 54yrs	Male
Open water swimming	15%	35 to 54yrs	Female
Golf	13%	35 to 54yrs	Male
Football	12%	16 to 34yrs	Male
Dancing	10%	55yrs and over	Female

In similar surveys, walking for recreation is always the most popular active leisure activity; it is easily accessible, inexpensive and, in pairs or groups, very sociable. It's interesting to note that open water swimming, whilst it has been a leisure activity for many years, is growing in popularity with many groups forming in the Borough. In presenting the top ten activities in order of their popularity it is not intended to infer any activity having more importance than another – all active leisure activities are equally valid!

Walking for recreation is enjoyed more by women than men, with a difference of 13 percentage points. Similarly *swimming/diving* and *keepfit/aerobics/yoga* are mostly enjoyed by women. The fairly recent popularity of *open water swimming* has more female participation. Male participation is higher than female participation in *jogging/running*, *weight training* and *cycling*. The starkest difference in gender-based participation levels is in *football* and in *golf* with both having a greater percentage of male participants. Again, this points to the need for a marketing focus in these activities to encourage more female involvement.

Participation		
	Male	Female
Football	23%	5%
Golf	19%	8%

Gym Membership

Nearly half (47%) of respondents are members of a Council leisure centre with 14% having private gym membership. This leaves 39% of respondents not having gym membership. Analysis reveals that membership of a Council facility is strongly linked to the key activities provided at the Council's leisure facilities – *swimming* and *keepfit/aerobics/yoga*. People who have no gym membership tend to be less involved in structured activities (price may be a barrier), finding *walking for recreation* more accessible.

⁸ Respondents were able to 'tick all that apply' from a list of 388 activities.

Ability and Opportunity

Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with two statements:

- ❖ I feel I have the ability to take part in active leisure opportunities – 69% high agreement.
- ❖ I feel I have the opportunity to take part in active leisure opportunities – 46% high agreement.

This comparison shows a generally positive sentiment towards the ability to participate but highlights a significant gap between *ability* and *opportunity*. Asked to comment on their responses, four themes emerge:

- ❖ Lack of accessible information
- ❖ Cost and affordability
- ❖ Geographic location of facilities
- ❖ Inclusivity and accessibility

The profile of those respondents reporting the lowest level of opportunities includes females, rural residents, people who are inactive, those aged 35 to 54yrs and those without leisure centre or gym membership. Here again Getting Active, Staying Active can help address the gap between ability and opportunity.

Why do people either participate or not participate in active leisure?

This question was posed to help understand the key drivers behind people's motivations relating to active leisure. The top motivations for being active are to do with how people feel about themselves:

79%	To improve my overall health and fitness
63%	To make me feel better
55%	To maintain my mental health
38%	To help control my weight

The top four reasons, or barriers for not being more active are:

30%	I don't have time
23%	I don't have enough money
23%	Lack of facilities/activities in my area
19%	Don't know what is on in my area

Macmillan Move More at Bangor Aurora Aquatic & Leisure Complex

At Bangor Aurora Aquatic & Leisure Complex the Macmillan Move More classes are making a positive difference in people's lives. One lady joined the classes after cancer treatment with very low motivation and feeling down. She improved her fitness/strength and became a great positive influence for other people in her class, even bringing in new members. She was able to return to work full time and is now a regular gym user at Aurora. Another Macmillan Move More client joined classes before his cancer treatment and was able to build himself up enough to have surgery and come back to classes for rehabilitation, attending multiple classes each week. His mood has greatly improved and he brings positive energy to all classes, creating a good atmosphere for everyone.

Other barriers for not being more active are, *'I feel self-conscious/embarrassed', 'I feel I can't commit to a programme', 'I feel my age (over 60) is a barrier', 'My disabilities make it difficult'*. It is people who experience these lesser-reported barriers, people who are the least able to take part who have the most to gain from becoming and remaining active. Only 1% of respondents said, *'I'm just not interested in being more active'*, which suggests that efforts to address the barriers will be viewed positively and result in increasing levels of activity amongst those who need it the most.

	Biggest Barrier	Second Biggest Barrier
16 to 34yrs	Time	Money
35 to 54yrs	Time	Lack of facilities/activities
55yrs and over	Age	Don't know what's on

Finding out about Active Leisure Opportunities

Respondents were asked about their preferred way to find out about locally available active leisure opportunities. Here are the results for all respondents:

75%	Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
44%	Council website and Facebook
38%	Leaflet/magazine through the door
13%	Council magazine
12%	Advert in local newspaper

Analysis confirms that social media platforms are favoured by the under 55s to a greater extent than the population at large. Perhaps an unexpected result for over 55s is that, whilst they favour social media platforms less than the population at large (by 12 percentage points) it is their most favoured means of finding out about leisure opportunities.

Where People do Active Leisure Activities

49%	Green/Blue Spaces
38%	Council/Club Facilities
13%	Home/Street/Road

The results confirm that green/blue spaces – public parks, greenways, forests, mountains/hills, rivers, lakes, beaches – are important resources for the enjoyment of active leisure, although not to the exclusion of Council and community sports groups' facilities. This highlights the surge in the use of green/blue spaces during the pandemic and in the years that followed. Strategies such as 'Active Living' (DfC) and 'The Power of Sport' (Sport NI) recognise this development and seek to sustain its growth.

Activity Providers' Survey

A total of 66 activity providers – community sports clubs and groups and charitable organisations – responded to the activity providers' survey which quizzed them on a range of issues. In these 66 groups total membership is just over 4,000.

Membership Size Range	Number of Groups	Approx. Total Members	
		No	% of Total
0-10	3	15	0.4%
11-50	20	610	15.0%
51-100	11	825	20.4%
100 plus	26	2,600	64.2%
Totals	60	4,050	100%

It's reckoned, based on similar research studies, that around 12% of the Borough's population are members of a club or group offering active leisure opportunities, giving a total numbers estimate of around 20,000 individuals. The majority of activity provider groups responding to the survey have 100 plus members, suggesting that a substantial portion of community participation is driven by these groups.

Engaging with the Council

Activity providers engage with the Council in a wide variety of ways, ranging from renting facilities for regular classes (eg, Ards Table Tennis Club, Let's Do Pilates) to organising large-scale events (eg, Swim Ulster Ltd for national swimming competitions). These collaborations span across different sports and community services, highlighting the Council's role in supporting a broad spectrum of activities that cater to diverse interests and needs within the community. Several collaborations emphasise health and wellbeing, particularly targeting underrepresented or vulnerable groups. For instance, Action Mental Health works with the Council to engage clients with mental ill health in leisure activities, and the Alzheimer's Society collaborates to offer dementia-friendly exercise classes. These examples underscore the Council's commitment to promoting inclusive and accessible health and wellbeing initiatives in collaboration with local organisations.

The Council also plays a crucial role in facilitating the organisation of events and providing access to resources. Clubs like Peninsula Triathlon Club and NI Orienteering benefit from the Council's assistance with event logistics, such as securing venues, road closures and promotional support. Additionally, financial grants and access agreements are vital in enabling groups to sustain their activities and attract wider participation, demonstrating the Council's significant contribution to their operational success.

Still thinking of working with the Council the survey questionnaire asked, '*would your group be interested in exploring opportunities to partner with the Council to deliver the leisure strategy?*'; 90% of the groups responding to this question replied *yes*. Whilst these responses were not probed further, this strong interest indicates a willingness within the community of activity providers to collaborate on the future delivery of active leisure opportunities.

Looking at where activity providers deliver active leisure opportunities the results evidence the importance of the mix of leisure centre and community (including sports club) facilities and the mix of indoor and outdoor facilities; indeed, outdoor locations accommodate slightly more organised activity than indoor facilities/locations. This emphasises the importance of the leisure strategy embracing outdoor locations and facilities, a point made by Sport England in saying that '*provision should not be limited to physical assets and facilities but include using parks, green and blue space, community*

centres, etc.’ Despite recent growth in virtual engagements, the survey suggests that activity providers deal mostly with in-person activities.

Burr Point Buoys; Open Water Swimming in Ballyhalbert Harbour

Burr Point Buoys started in the summer of 2020 during COVID-19 as a ‘*way of exercising and socialising safely and clearing the mind of how crazy life was back then!*’. The group swims every day at Ballyhalbert Harbour and the swim is posted on their Facebook page.

The name of the group comes from the harbour being beside Burr Point, the most easterly point in Northern Ireland and an orange ‘Buoy’ in the harbour. The group’s leader, Lucy, says, ‘*We are a fully welcoming group of all ages and abilities and are blessed with a gentle slipway to access the sea so swimmers with mobility issues have no difficulty.*’

Burr Point Buoys is linked with Ballyhalbert & District Community Association which operates Talbot House, a community hall in the village. The hall is used for a variety of activities providing both physical and mental wellbeing in an isolated rural area with limited public transport.



Burr Point Buoys, one of several open water swimming groups across the Borough

Why do people participate in your group?

Activity providers were asked, *what motivates people to get involved with your group?* The results demonstrate that people’s main motivation for getting involved with an activity provider group is linked to how they feel about themselves, either through better health and fitness or mental health. *Meeting people* and *socialising* is also an important aspect which can be enjoyed by participating in activities or even as an administrator. *Developing skills* is also an important consideration, however, *elite performance* is regarded by activity providers as being of much less importance in people deciding to get involved. Activity provider groups need to offer activities that cater to fitness and health improvement whilst also fostering environments that encourage social interaction and a sense of belonging alongside skill development. Also important is the need to incorporate activities, or elements of activities, which promote relaxation, stress relief and mental wellbeing. Activity provider groups are clearly people-focused, favouring in-person activities rather than virtual (online) activities.

How can the Council help your group?

Twenty-four activity provider groups gave open comment responses to the question, ‘*how could the Council help your group increase its current membership or deliver different activities to a new*

membership type or partner with your group to help deliver the leisure strategy?’ Here are two responses by way of example:

*‘We need to ensure the strategy engages those with disabilities including mental ill health. **The leisure centres are fabulous for those that are motivated to attend but we need to reach out to those who are not.** Suggestion to establish a group to seek views from those with disabilities regarding leisure provision both to suggest new opportunities and congratulate the Council on initiatives that have been successful. Clarify where mental health & wellbeing fits in with leisure strategy and other departments in Council eg community, arts, wellbeing etc.’*

Action Mental Health

‘We would be keen to be part of a strategic movement to get more children and young people active for their overall wellbeing, but in a way that is accessible to all and removes the barriers that can come with specific sports (fear of not being good enough, not making the team, not understanding the rules, being sat on the sideline watching others play etc). We also want to bridge the health inequality gap that exists for so many children and young people; particularly those who live in deprivation, those with disabilities, and girls. All of them are statistically least likely to participate or have the least opportunities to participate in physical activity.’

Active Youth NI

These responses and the activity providers’ survey results generally emphasise the importance of making active leisure opportunities more inclusive, particularly for girls and women, people with disability, people with mental health challenges, children and young people and those living in deprived areas. Suggestions include tailored outreach, specialised activities and collaborations with organisations already working with these sectors. There is a strong call to reduce barriers to participation by offering more affordable or subsidised activities and addressing psychological barriers like embarrassment or fear of failure.

Schools’ Survey

In recent years schools have increasingly been reaching out to the communities they serve, encouraging community use of their facilities, including sports facilities. This has significant benefits for the schools and the community, especially in areas where public and other facilities for active leisure activities cannot meet demand. A total of 22 schools (16 primary, 6 post primary) responded to the survey.

It's important to know how schools deliver leisure, sport and wellbeing activities either in association with the Council or independently. Seven of the 22 schools deliver leisure, sport or wellbeing activities in association with the Council; a further 11 schools deliver these activities independently. One school said:

'We have girls' football sessions P5 and P7 swim weekly in Blair Mayne. As part of our extended schools funding we run (i) an after-school football club for P2 to P7; (ii) an after-school rounders club for P5 to P7 girls; (iii) we host a football and rounders tournament each year – 13 primary schools attend; (iv) we are introducing an after-school gymnastics club for P1 to P7.'

Thinking about community use of schools only 45% currently open their facilities for community use outside curriculum time, however, nearly all of the schools not currently open for community use would consider this in the future. The Education Authority and Sport NI encourage community use of schools' facilities outside curriculum time, however, it's up to each school to decide on community use and to make it happen. Community use of schools is not part of the education sector's core function and whilst there may be a willingness to consider community use, school management teams often need to be guided and assisted through the process of setting up community use. Indeed, the survey results confirm this as 12 of the schools said they don't have the capacity (staff, volunteers, facilities) to accommodate community use.

Active Youth NI

Active Youth NI, based in Bangor, was born from a passion and desire to get more people active to improve not only their physical health, but also their mental and emotional wellbeing. The group's Business Development Director, Joni, says, *'Our mission is to ensure every child and young person has access to physical activity and we aim to reduce health inequity by increasing provision for all children regardless of their level of ability, their socio-economic background or gender; our sessions take away the pressure of "making the team" and bring the fun back into being active.'* One of the children in the group's Active for All programme, an initiative for children in deprived areas, said, *'The activities we had planned for us were amazing. Doing the activities has made me feel more comfortable being with groups of people I'm not so friendly with and helped me use problem-solving skills for most activities. I really would want to do something like this again.'*



Active Youth NI, getting young people active in Ards and North Down

A significant majority (95%) of schools expressed interest in exploring partnerships with the Council to deliver Getting Active, Staying Active. This indicates a strong willingness among educational institutions to collaborate on initiatives that promote physical activity, health and wellbeing. While 35% of schools currently deliver leisure, sport or wellbeing activities in partnership with the Council, a larger percentage (55%) run these activities independently of the Council. This suggests there is potential for greater integration with Council resources. Among the schools that do not open their facilities for community use, the primary barriers identified were extra staffing costs (91%) and insurance concerns (64%). These obstacles highlight the need for additional support or funding to enable schools to make their facilities more accessible to the wider community. Nearly half (45%) of the schools indicated they have plans to develop or expand their leisure/sports facilities. Schools mentioned a range of potential projects, from building new pitches to upgrading existing ones, but noted that financial constraints are a significant challenge in realising these plans.

Summary

Here are the key learning points from Finding Out:

Partnerships are critical to the success of Getting Active, Staying Active. All three surveys highlight the importance of effective partnership working that engages key agencies, organisations, groups and the community. Partnerships can leverage resources, expertise and outreach capabilities. They can also facilitate the development of programmes that are responsive to community needs, promote shared use of facilities and assist in the move towards active wellbeing.

Inclusive and diverse opportunities for active leisure is a significant theme. Inclusivity is a particular need for individuals with disabilities, mental health challenges and marginalised groups. This can be achieved by partnering with organisations already working with underrepresented groups, helping to design activities that are accessible and welcoming.

Cost emerged as a barrier to participation in leisure activities, noted in the Community Survey and by activity providers and schools. This highlights the importance of creating affordable or subsidised leisure programmes to encourage broad community access.

Accessibility of information is important. There is a need for a co-ordinated approach to marketing, perhaps focusing on a centralised user-friendly information hub that is easily accessible across different platforms. Traditional and digital methods should be used to ensure all demographics are well informed about active leisure opportunities.

4. Living Better, Living Longer

We all want to live long and healthy lives and we all want to participate in active leisure activities. It's widely recognised that being active is being healthy yet many of us disregard the message of the benefits or can't find a way around the barriers. Our quality of life – physical and mental – at all ages is greatly helped by an active lifestyle, helping to keep us well and able to participate in and contribute to our communities at the level of our choosing.

People living in Ards and North Down generally enjoy good health. Of the Department of Health's 32 measures of health analysed for Ards and North Down 21 are better than and 11 are similar to the NI average; none are worse.⁹ Looking at life expectancy, even though the age profile of Ards and North Down is older than the NI average, women can expect to live 0.7 years beyond the NI average and men 1.6 years.

*'We don't stop being active because we grow old,
we grow old because we stop being active.'*

Here's a rough guide¹⁰ to what happens to our body as we age and what we can do to keep well.

Age		
18	Skin	Our skin starts to be less stretchy. We can slow the process by not smoking and having good eating habits.
30	Lungs	Our lung function begins dropping from age 30 by about 1% a year; a sedentary lifestyle increases this but exercise can reduce it.
35	Bones	After age 35 bone mass tends to reduce by up to 1% per year. Weight-bearing exercise makes a big difference to bone density and is especially important for older people.
40	Muscles	We all lose muscle and gain fat from around age 40. Regular activity that works our muscles reduces muscle decline.
50	Kidneys	Our key function – waterworks! – reduces from about age 50. Drink plenty of water, around 6 to 8 glasses daily.
60	Gut	We absorb fewer nutrients as the tiny hairs – villi – in our gut tend to flatten out. Eating well is important to keep our gut healthy.
65	Heart	Our body's ability to use oxygen reduces by about 10% every ten years from an early age and arteries tend to get stiffer. We can reduce the risk of heart disease by staying active throughout our lives.
65	Ears	Age-induced hearing loss happens gradually, affecting 1 in 3 people aged 65 to 75. We can't do much to slow it but listening to lots of loud music will hasten it!

⁹ *Health Inequalities: Annual Report 2024. Department of Health.*

¹⁰ *Taken from an article in Time Magazine 2015.*

70	Brain	By age 70 we start to see age-related brain changes speed up. We can slow these changes by keeping up activities that engage and stimulate us.
----	-------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Sit Less, Move More

Here are six benefits to embracing an active lifestyle for us to think about:

- ❖ By the time we reach 60 many of our health outcomes have already been determined. So getting and staying active throughout our lives really helps us keep well and enjoy our later years.
- ❖ Being active with family and friends encourages a sense of wellbeing and makes children feel good about themselves whilst reinforcing family bonds.
- ❖ Whatever our age or ability, even small changes to our active lives will make us feel good and give us more energy.
- ❖ Active leisure helps us feel happier by reducing feelings of stress and giving us a sense of achievement. It also helps improve sleep and boosts our self-esteem.
- ❖ Moving more is known to reduce the risk of us developing many common long-term conditions such as heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes and some cancers.
- ❖ Making active leisure a habit can help with breathing difficulties, high blood pressure and bone health.

‘Healthy is an outfit that looks different on everybody.’

Not all of us are naturally active and it can be hard to know where to begin. Start small by finding easy ways to fit being active into your daily life and build up gradually as you begin to see the benefits. Time constraints top the list of barriers to getting and staying active but with planning it’s possible to be active every day; here are three things to think about:

- ❖ Being active is time for you! Keep to a daily schedule and you’ll see the benefits to your physical and mental health.
- ❖ Combine being active with other daily activities, perhaps walking or cycling for the school run, or to work.
- ❖ Even short bursts of activity all add up. Think stairs instead of the lift or go for a brisk walk at lunchtime.

Every Move Counts

The World Health Organisation tells us that *‘being active has significant health benefits for hearts, bodies and minds whether you’re walking, wheeling or cycling, dancing, doing sport or playing with your kids.’* Here’s WHO’s guidance¹¹ on how much physical activity we should be thinking about:

¹¹ WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour (2020).

EVERY MOVE COUNTS

Being active has significant health benefits for hearts, bodies and minds, whether you're walking, wheeling or cycling, dancing, doing sport or playing with your kids.



WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour (2020).
For more information, visit: www.who.int/health-topics/physical-activity

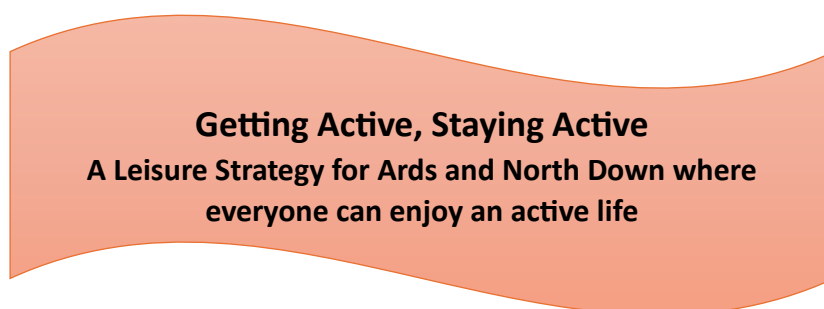


'A year from now you may wish you had started today.'

5. The Strategy

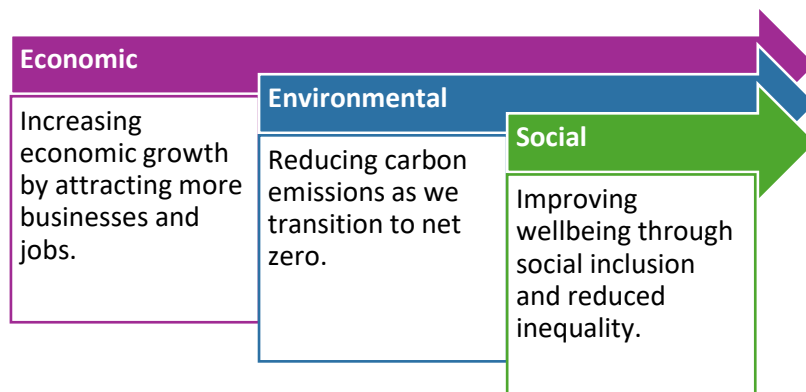
Vision

Research and consultation told us what you feel is important in creating a leisure strategy for the Borough. We need to engage the inactive, that is, people of all ages who are presently inactive or not active enough. Inequalities in the wellbeing of people living in the most deprived areas will be tackled by the leisure strategy having a focus on encouraging and enabling them to be more active. We also need to encourage people to remain active throughout their lives to help them enjoy the benefits of an active lifestyle. Listening to what you have told us, the vision and strapline, which is also the strategy's title, leaves no one out:



Strategy

Getting Active, Staying Active is led by the Council and delivered in partnership with a wide range of agencies, organisations and groups which share an interest in getting people to be more active in Ards and North Down. It's good to keep in mind that Getting Active, Staying Active is part and parcel of the Council's Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 and its three overlapping priorities:



These priorities link one to the other and Getting Active, Staying Active makes an important contribution to each one. Active lifestyles benefit our physical and mental wellbeing, our community development and our economic development by helping us to be healthier and happier whatever our circumstances or age. Being active every day helps us and our communities to thrive, contributing to the Council's vision of A Sustainable Borough. Research by Sport England¹² estimates that the average wellbeing value of sport and physical activity to *fairly active* individuals, per person, per year is:

¹² *The social value of sport and physical activity in England (2024). 'Fairly active' adults do 30 to 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week; 'fairly active' children and young people do an average of 30 to 60 minutes moderate intensity physical activity a day.*

All adults (16+) £1,200 **Children & young people (11-16yrs)** £3,100

The research also estimates the wider value to society of ‘fairly active adults’, again per person per year, based on a range of health outcomes, as being:

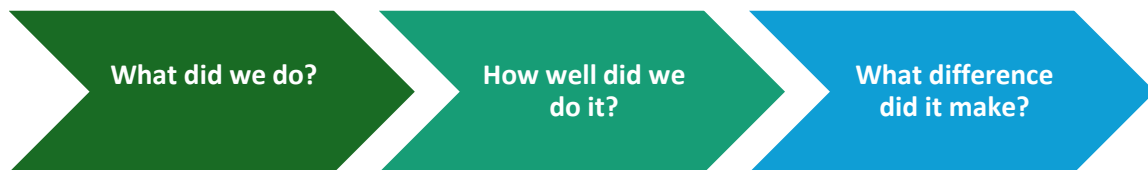
All adults (16+) £230 **Age 16 to 64** £196 **Age 65+** £333

Sport England says, ‘wellbeing value to an individual likely captures the sheer enjoyment of being active, the benefits to physical and mental health and knock-on impacts for other aspects of life such as relationships, social connections and work.’

The strategy will focus on four themes across the 10-year period. It’s an ever-present challenge to encourage and enable the inactive to be active and to encourage everyone to stay active. That’s why Getting Active, Staying Active is in place for 10 years, giving it every chance to deliver actions that make an appreciable difference in the lives of everyone living in Ards and North Down.

Theme	Outcome
Active Partnerships	All Council departments and relevant external organisations have ownership of the strategy and are committed to its delivery. The strategy’s potential is realised.
Active Opportunities	All sections of the ANDBC population are able to access active leisure opportunities that suit their age, abilities, interests and circumstances.
Active Communications	Better awareness of opportunities for active leisure through a mix of general and targeted information both printed and on social media platforms.
Active Support	Activity providers are supported in their work to deliver active leisure opportunities.

The strategy will be delivered in three stages with action plans and measurement for each of the four strategic themes. This approach allows a periodic assessment of the difference being made by the strategy’s implementation. It also allows successive action plans to take account of what has been achieved and to address new challenges. Monitoring and reporting of each stage will broadly follow this approach:



Theme 1 – Active Partnerships

Consultation for Getting Active, Staying Active engaged statutory organisations and the community and voluntary sector, around 130 groups in total, some working throughout Northern Ireland, some working at a local level. Enabling more people to be active is common to all these organisations and there is a keen desire to work together. One organisation emphasised this in saying, *‘more can be achieved by working together.’*

The Council already works with a wide range of organisations in the delivery of active leisure opportunities, including local activity provider groups, schools, community groups, Sport NI, sports governing bodies, charities, the Education Authority, the Public Health Agency, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and many more. Getting Active, Staying Active will look to develop existing partnerships and create new ones, all striving to get more people active. Whilst the focus is on residents, it is expected that the outworking of partnership working will also encourage and enable visitors to engage in the many and varied leisure activities on offer throughout the Borough. Partnerships will be well defined with each partner playing an active role in implementing the strategy during its lifetime.

It’s widely recognised that active leisure contributes to a better society. That’s why government directs its departments and agencies to work in partnership in promoting active lifestyles. As the operation of leisure services continues to transition from its former role as a facilitator to becoming an active wellbeing service, it is critical that like-minded organisations share responsibility in effective partnerships, ensuring efficient use of resources and maximising the impact of Getting Active, Staying Active. Partnerships can take many forms, from the formal partnership between statutory agencies that will be necessary to implement Getting Active, Staying Active through to agreements with local activity provider groups.

‘We need to work with organisations who know and understand the audiences we want to target, including partners who we’ve traditionally not worked with.’

Active Lives Survey, Sport England

Active Partnerships – Strategic Actions

- 1. Build on existing working relations and partnerships with statutory agencies.** Everyone and every organisation has a role to play in Getting Active, Staying Active, with a shared vision of an active, healthy and happy Ards and North Down community. No-one must feel being active is not for them. Partnership arrangements will be designed to encourage and enable everyone to be active. At the outset a Strategy Implementation Group will be set up involving all key stakeholder agencies in a formal partnership, tasked with implementing the strategy, monitoring progress, reviewing and evaluating outcomes and refreshing the strategic approach as necessary.

2. ***Involve the Education Authority and schools in partnerships to open up more schools to community use outside curriculum time.*** The Education Authority encourages community use of schools, however, the work to achieve this lies largely with the schools themselves. Given that schools' core purpose is academic study it's often the case that barriers to community use are a particular challenge and cannot be overcome by schools alone. The outworking of this strategic priority is local communities having access to facilities in their neighbourhood, helping to involve more people in active leisure.
3. ***Consider partnerships with activity provider groups*** especially groups who target people who are inactive, young people, women and girls, older people and people with physical and/or mental disabilities. These groups including non-statutory sector groups such as charities could become accredited 'agents' working to achieve the same active leisure outcomes as Getting Active, Staying Active. The scope of this strategic action is potentially extensive, including, for example, partnering with care/residential homes to encourage active leisure. It could also involve leasing existing Council facilities to these activity provider groups, ensuring general community access in the terms of the lease.
4. ***Partner with local communities in neighbourhoods*** to understand the strengths and weaknesses of leisure provision and how to best address the barriers that discourage or even prevent residents from being active. It is essential that by working in places where stubborn health inequalities persist, community-led solutions for active leisure can be agreed through partnership working.

Success Factors

Everyone working together	Strong and effective partnerships are in place, making a difference and sustained throughout the strategy period.
Shared Access	The number of education sites making facilities available to the community for active leisure has increased.
New partners	More and different partners are involved in collective leisure provision working in new and innovative ways to promote active leisure.

Theme 2 – Active Opportunities

There are thousands of active leisure opportunities delivered annually by the Council. Added to this are the opportunities created and delivered by a wide range of groups working in local communities. These opportunities suit a lot of people – people who know what they want to do and have the time and money to take up the opportunities. Yet too many people are inactive or not active enough to benefit their health and wellbeing. In the course of listening to what people said about provision for active leisure we better understand how the 10-year strategy can help in ensuring better access to active leisure opportunities for everyone.

‘The leisure centres in ANDBC are fabulous for those who are motivated to attend but we need to reach out to those who are not.’

Action Mental Health

We need to encourage people to be active in their own way – it doesn’t mean being ‘sporty’ and indeed we know that walking for recreation is the most popular leisure activity. This highlights the importance of outdoor spaces for active leisure. Survey results tell us that green/blue spaces (public parks, greenways, forests, mountains/hills, rivers, lakes, beaches, sea) are where many people enjoy active leisure, especially older people. The survey results also tell us that most people participate in active leisure to improve their overall health and fitness, their mental health and simply to make themselves feel better. Active leisure opportunities are valued not only for their physical benefits but also for their contribution to mental and emotional wellbeing.

‘There are deep-rooted inequalities in sport and physical activity which means there are people who feel excluded from being active because the right options and opportunities aren’t there.’

Active Lives Survey, Sport England

We also know a lot more about why people are not as active as they should be. Time, money and *‘lack of facilities/activities in my area’* along with not knowing what opportunities are available are all significant barriers, but being self-conscious, *‘bored with the same old things’* and age (over 60) can also be barriers. The key learning point is that in the knowledge of what holds people back from being more active, leisure providers can help address the barriers.

Of the nearly 1,600 people completing the community survey, not a single person selected, ‘I’m just not interested in being active’ as a barrier!

A walk with family, a swim in the sea, a night of dancing, a game of pickleball, a gentle jog, armchair exercises, cycle to work or a game of softball, we can all enjoy active leisure opportunities, indoors or outdoors, with others or on our own. We all have a role to play in Active Opportunities – parents,

teachers, elected representatives, policy makers, community leaders, ‘coaches’, friends, business owners. We are naturally active so Active Opportunities is about us.

Active Opportunities – Strategic Actions

1. **Give a greater focus to minority groups** – women and girls, people with a disability or long-term illness, older people, young people. It’s often the case that these people are less active than society in general yet they can benefit the most. Getting Active, Staying Active will seek to encourage and enable these people towards a more active lifestyle by offering active opportunities that suit their needs.
2. **Widen access to active opportunities throughout the Borough with a place-based approach.** This approach focuses on tailoring services to meet specific local need and ensuring activities are located where they can have the most impact with hard-to-reach sections of the community.
3. **Ensure the scheduling of active opportunities enables access by as many people as possible.** A user-centric model of leisure provision as advocated by national, regional and local strategies emphasises the need to understand local demographics. Getting Active, Staying Active requires a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more flexible and responsive model that adapts to people’s changing circumstances.
4. **Widen the understanding of ‘active leisure provider’** to attract new sectors, organisations and groups with new ideas and fresh approaches to designing and delivering active leisure opportunities. The traditional approach to leisure provision is changing as active wellbeing becomes a priority right across society; Sport England encourages public leisure to move towards an active wellbeing service, that is ‘*doing more to create healthier and more active communities.*’* Getting Active, Staying Active presents an opportunity to think afresh and create a reimagined active leisure movement that everyone can get involved with.

* *Future of public sector leisure. Sport England 2022.*

Success Factors

More people enjoy active leisure	An increase in regular participation in active leisure.
Flexible scheduling of active leisure opportunities	Daytime delivery of active leisure opportunities by activity providers increases.
Growth in active leisure opportunities to the wider community	An increase in delivery of opportunities in community centres/sports clubs.

Theme 3 – Active Communications

Consultation for Getting Active, Staying Active told us a great deal about the need for good lines of communication. Perhaps the most pressing need is to constantly promote the benefits of being active to individuals and their communities. This is especially important in areas of deprivation where people are much less likely to have active lifestyles than those living elsewhere.

In the survey year, 33% of adults living in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland had participated in sport compared to 61% of adults living in the least deprived areas.

NI Continuous Household Survey 2022/23

It is those people, at whatever age who are presently inactive or not active enough who will benefit most from becoming active and remaining active throughout their lives. Getting these people more active is the overarching challenge, widely recognised by all stakeholder organisations. Many statutory and community organisations make every effort to address this challenge yet there are still sections of society which are oblivious to the message of the benefits of having an active lifestyle. Engaging the inactive must be key to Active Communications.

The Department for Communities' 'Active Living' strategy states, *'By promoting the benefits of sport and physical activity we will help to address the inequalities that currently exist with regards to access for many and we will enhance awareness in access to sport and physical activity and enhance awareness of the value to the individual and society of more people being more active more of the time. Inactive or sedentary lifestyles can lead to physical and mental ill-health and to social inclusion. Encouraging those who are inactive to take the first steps to engagement in sport and physical activity can be life changing. This is a key public health message, but getting the message across to inactive groups can be challenging.'*

Active Communications is also about how people find out about active leisure opportunities. In the age of high-tech communications it doesn't suit everyone to get information from social media platforms.

Social media platforms are favoured by those aged under 55 years to a greater extent than the population at large. Surprisingly, for the over 55s social media platforms are their most favoured means of finding out about active leisure opportunities although to a lesser extent than younger people. Easy access to information is essential; analysis highlights that printed material is more important for over 55s than younger people. One elderly respondent said, *'Information is there if I need it but there are many my age and over who have lost so much confidence, which comes with age, who just don't know where to go to ask and don't like to ask.'*

Community Survey 2024

Active Communications – Strategic Actions

- 1. *Active leisure is not just about being 'sporty'.*** For Getting Active, Staying Active to make a difference we need to debunk the myth that active lifestyles are all about sport. Agencies tasked with promoting sport now include physical activity and wellbeing in their messaging; indeed, the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for NI is entitled Active Living: More People, More Active, More of the Time. This is an important development in strategic thinking that Getting Active, Staying Active embraces and will promote.
- 2. *Promote the benefits of active lifestyles to specific target groups.*** People at different ages and in different circumstances need to hear about the benefits most important to them. For example, people with Type 2 diabetes can potentially improve their condition through time by being more active. Older people need strength training as they age to help them stay mobile for their daily routine. Young people can reduce levels of stress and anxiety through active leisure. Family bonds are strengthened by exercising together.
- 3. *Consider a range of communications tools to ensure everyone has access to information about active leisure opportunities.*** We need to ensure that people's differing preferences as to how they access information can be met. It's likely this will be a mix of social media and other forms of communication. As with promoting the benefits, different forms of communication may be suited to different target groups. A 'one stop shop' for information should be considered.
- 4. *Ensure messaging on active leisure is promoted across all Council functions.*** A Sustainable Borough, the Council's Corporate Plan, has '*opportunities for people to be active and healthy*' as one of its seven outcomes. It's important that Getting Active, Staying Active integrates across the Council's many and varied functions. This will require ongoing and effective communication with and involvement of each department.

Success Factors

Awareness of the benefits	There is a better understanding of the benefits of participating in active leisure.
Improved access to information	People find it easier to get information about active leisure opportunities, again contributing to increased participation.
Information is specific to target groups	Different groups of people are presented with information that is relevant to their needs.

Theme 4 – Active Support

In Ards and North Down as in every other local authority area there are hundreds of organisations and groups providing active leisure opportunities; these include around 150 sports clubs and many other commercial operators, charities, community groups and even informal groups with a shared interest

In sports clubs alone in ANDBC it's estimated there are over 4,000 volunteers (about 60% male, 40% female) delivering active leisure opportunities to around 12% of the population.

in being active. Many of these activity provider organisations are mostly run by volunteers who get involved because they have a passion for their activity and for enabling more people to enjoy active lifestyles. Some of these activities are instantly recognisable, such as football, cricket, gymnastics; others less so such as softball, pickleball, open water swimming. All told, these organisations and groups deliver thousands of active leisure opportunities each year to thousands of people across the Borough and it's recognised that the Council already supports many of them in many different ways.

As Getting Active, Staying Active looks to support activity providers in their work, we need to understand the impact of and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdowns led to a resurgence in appreciation of outdoor spaces including forests, beaches and parks. These 'green and blue' spaces are easily accessible for most people and the renewed interest in using them is helping to increase awareness of the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor activities.

'The pandemic has generated a renewed emphasis on community, something which was evident in the way sports clubs and volunteers supported communities and the most vulnerable ensuring that no-one was left isolated.

The importance of learning the lessons of its impacts cannot be underestimated. This includes the importance of government departments, local Councils, sports governing bodies and others working together to support the sector, build capacity, capability and resilience while also overseeing the recovery effort to build back better.

The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for NI: Department for Communities

In its Supporting Sport to Build Back Better (SSBBB) programme in the post-pandemic period Sport NI's objective was to *'Develop a strengthened, more connected sporting and physical recreation sector providing increased capability and develop innovation and confidence with new ways of working.'* In delivering SSBBB important lessons were learnt in the areas of business capability, people development capability, digital connectivity and mental health & wellbeing. In addition, SSBBB awarded revenue funding directly to sports clubs through two projects, *Team Up* and *Activate*.

Team Up awarded an average of £21k to 28 clubs to target specific sections of the population (ethnic minorities, disabled, deprived neighbourhoods, females, over 50s) with activities that took a fresh look at the clubs' offering in the face of challenges presented by the pandemic. Clubs reported an increased capability and confidence in moving forward with fresh and innovative approaches in the design and delivery of activities.

Activate awarded up to £5k to 56 clubs across 17 sports. The unique feature of Activate was the requirement for each club to raise at least the same amount as their award through Crowdfunder UK. The initiative was very successful with all award recipients achieving their Crowdfunding target and some even doubling or tripling their target. One family spoke of their 34-year-old son living with cerebral palsy who, through the Activate project was able to enjoy visits to the beach for the first time since childhood.

Activity provider organisations and groups are integral to Getting Active, Staying Active and supporting them in their work will result in more people taking up active leisure opportunities.

Active Support – Strategic Actions

- 1. Encourage volunteers and volunteering.** Volunteers are the lifeblood of activity provider organisations and groups. They have skills and experience to plan, organise and deliver active leisure opportunities. They can benefit from support in operational matters and in encouraging them in new ways of thinking and doing things.
- 2. Support activity providers offering active leisure opportunities in outdoor spaces.** The use of green/blue spaces has increased in the wake of the pandemic resulting in activity provider groups emerging where people can join together in the use of these spaces. A good example is the growth in open sea swimming groups, bringing a new awareness to this activity. The Council is already proactive in enabling access to green/blue spaces.
- 3. Assist activity providers to move forward with digital technology.** Activity providers, especially sports clubs, tend to communicate with their existing members and wider network of friends and families rather than reaching out to potential new members. Time spent (by volunteers) on administration can contribute to volunteer burn-out. What's needed is a focus on developing digital technology skills to assist with a range of functions.
- 4. Empower activity providers in their financial health.** For many activity provider organisations and groups membership fees and fundraising events are the top income generators whilst facility hire and insurances are the top expenses. Financial health is a key concern for many groups and can often be a barrier to expanding activity programmes; 'help to draw down funding' is cited as the most needed type of support in a recent survey of sports clubs in ANDBC.*

5. **Promote an understanding of health and wellbeing in activity provider organisations and groups.** Active leisure’s impact on health and wellbeing is significant. It also contributes to challenges such as obesity, reduces risk of illness and it promotes good mental health. Activity providers increasingly recognise their role in promoting health and wellbeing. Getting Active, Staying Active can help them be aware of how to integrate health and wellbeing with their core activity programmes.
6. **Promote innovative monitoring and evaluation.** Modern methods of monitoring and evaluation follow the principle of Outcomes Based Accountability – What did we do? How well did we do it? What difference did it make? It’s important that activity providers can promote their story to prospective members, to the Council, to stakeholders and to funding agencies. This is often overlooked or not given enough attention; OBA’s focus is on people.

** Club Survey 2019/2020 – A Headline Report for Ards and North Down. Sport NI.*

Success Factors

Volunteering skills are enhanced	Whether it’s digital technology, programme development, monitoring & evaluation or governance, activity providers think differently and are more resilient to challenges.
Activity providers feel more financially sustainable	Greater confidence in ANDBC sports clubs being able to meet financial demands.
Growth in use of green/blue spaces	An increase in use of green/blue spaces.
Gap between male and female volunteers in sports clubs is narrowed	An increase in the percentage of female volunteers.

6. What Next?

Getting Active, Staying Active puts in place four strategic themes and high-level actions that reflect what you said is needed to improve the provision of active leisure opportunities across the Borough. Now we need to breathe life into the strategy and keep an eye on how it is making a difference in people's lives. We need a way to deliver the strategy, monitor progress and periodically review progress to ensure the strategy is on track to achieve its vision and re-set strategic actions as necessary. The scale of the task is not to be underestimated if it is to be successful in helping leisure provision (by all providers) move towards an active wellbeing service.

This can only be achieved through agencies, organisations and communities working together in effective partnerships. This is not a Council strategy, rather, it is a strategy for the Borough so it will have buy-in and commitment from statutory and non-statutory organisations which also strive to get more people more active. Shared responsibility for implementation and delivery of the strategy through strong partnerships will ensure that the Council's present provision for leisure is enhanced, not reduced.

What is needed now is:

1. Strategic Implementation
2. Monitoring and Reporting

Strategic Implementation

Leisure Strategy Forum

Set up an internal (Council) Leisure Strategy Forum to engage and inform key staff across departments, ensuring the strategy has internal ownership and is effective across and between departments, complementing and supplementing all Council strategies and plans. The Leisure Strategy Forum's first task will be to agree how to establish a Strategy Implementation Group.

Strategy Implementation Group

Set up a Strategy Implementation Group to include, as a minimum, Department for Communities, Sport NI, Education Authority, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, ANDBC. The Strategic Implementation Group will drive the strategy forward. Members will agree a suitable format for the group, its responsibilities, how it will be governed and how the strategy will be resourced. The group's role is to facilitate the strategy's delivery, oversee and review progress.

Thematic Working Groups

Establish four thematic working groups, one for each strategic theme. The task of the thematic working groups is to deliver the Action Plan. Their role is operational so each one will involve people with skills and experience relating to the theme. They will also be responsible for collecting data to help monitor and report on progress, feeding back to the Strategy Implementation Group on a periodic basis.

Monitoring and Reporting

We need to know what difference the strategy is making. We'll do this by setting measurements against each of the success factors. To help gather information we will:

- ❖ Repeat the surveys which inform the strategy.
- ❖ Review the Department of Health's annual report on health inequalities.

Theme	Success Factors	Measurement												
1. Active Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Everyone working together</i> ▪ <i>Shared access</i> ▪ <i>New partners</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leisure Strategy Forum (Council) established. ▪ Strategy Implementation Group established and formally adopted by partner groups. ▪ Thematic working groups established. ▪ 3 post-primary schools progressing towards community use of their facilities outside curriculum time. ▪ Partnerships established with 6 activity provider groups. ▪ Partnerships established with 3 community organisations operating in areas of deprivation. 												
2. Active Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>More people enjoy active leisure</i> ▪ <i>Flexible scheduling of active leisure opportunities</i> ▪ <i>Growth in active leisure to the wider community</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'Regular' participation in active leisure, a combination of daily and several times a week increases from 71% of community survey respondents currently to 75%. ▪ Daytime delivery of active leisure opportunities by activity providers increases from 54% of total hours currently to 60%. ▪ Increase in active leisure opportunities delivered by activity provider groups in community centres/sports clubs from 23% currently to 28%. ▪ Increase in active leisure opportunities delivered by activity provider groups in public parks/green spaces from 17% currently to 20%. <p>Improvement in Life Expectancy in Deprived Areas:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3">MALE</th> </tr> <tr> <th></th> <th>Current</th> <th>Target</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>At birth</td> <td>77.2yrs</td> <td>77.7yrs</td> </tr> <tr> <td>At age 65</td> <td>17.5yrs</td> <td>18.5yrs</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	MALE				Current	Target	At birth	77.2yrs	77.7yrs	At age 65	17.5yrs	18.5yrs
MALE														
	Current	Target												
At birth	77.2yrs	77.7yrs												
At age 65	17.5yrs	18.5yrs												

Theme	Success Factors	Measurement									
		<p style="text-align: center;">FEMALE</p> <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Current</th> <th>Target</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>At birth</td> <td>81.0yrs</td> <td>81.5yrs</td> </tr> <tr> <td>At age 65</td> <td>20.3yrs</td> <td>20.8yrs</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">Improvement in Obesity at Primary Schools Year 8:</p> <p>LGD 26% Deprived areas 34% Gap – 8 percentage points. Target – gap reduced by 2 percentage points.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 ‘new’ activity provider groups are recruited. ▪ 2 public facilities are leased to clubs and other providers to deliver active leisure opportunities. ▪ Consultant appointed to prepare a new Sports Facility Strategy. ▪ Stories of how people have benefited from active leisure opportunities, especially those who have previously been inactive. ▪ Gap between <i>ability to participate</i> and <i>opportunity to participate</i> reduced from 23 percentage points to 18 percentage points. ▪ ‘<i>I don’t have time</i>’ as a barrier to participation reduced from 30% to 25% of survey population. ▪ Increase in use of Greenways. 		Current	Target	At birth	81.0yrs	81.5yrs	At age 65	20.3yrs	20.8yrs
	Current	Target									
At birth	81.0yrs	81.5yrs									
At age 65	20.3yrs	20.8yrs									
<p>3. Active Communications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Awareness of the benefits</i> ▪ <i>Improved access to information</i> ▪ <i>Information is specific to target groups</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As the preferred way to let people know about active leisure opportunities, social media platforms increase from 75% to 80% of survey population. ▪ ‘<i>Don’t know what is on in my area</i>’ as a barrier to participation reduced from 19% to 15% of survey population. ▪ ‘<i>I feel my age (over 60) is a barrier</i>’ reduced from 8% to zero of survey population. 									
<p>4. Active Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Volunteering skills are enhanced</i> ▪ <i>Activity providers feel more financially sustainable.</i> ▪ <i>Growth in use of green/blue spaces</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Targeted revenue support programme in place. ▪ Training programmes prepared – active wellbeing, completing funding applications, sports/activity development planning, charitable/CASC registration, digital technology, Outcomes Based Accountability. Training in each programme 									

Theme	Success Factors	Measurement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Gap between male and female volunteers in sports clubs is narrowed</i> 	<p>delivered once to at least 20 activity provider groups in total.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'Buddy' project set up, involving 3 pairings of activity providers. ▪ 4 activity provider groups facilitated through crowdfunding. ▪ Confidence in meeting financial demands (sports clubs) increases from 68% to 72%. ▪ Use of green/blue spaces increases from 49% to 55%. ▪ Increase in female volunteers in sports clubs from 41% to 45% of all volunteers.