

Getting Active, Staying Active

LEISURE STRATEGY 2025-2034



A LEISURE STRATEGY FOR ARDS AND NORTH DOWN
WHERE EVERYONE CAN ENJOY AN ACTIVE LIFE

www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk



An Overview



This is Ards and North Down's first leisure strategy. Creating the strategy has been led by the Council whilst its implementation will be coordinated by a partnership of agencies and groups offering active leisure opportunities (anything that involves exercise) in the Borough. Consultation, through surveys and meetings has been extensive, showing a great deal of interest in and support for the strategy's vision as well as a keen desire to be involved in its delivery. The strategy is being brought forward at a time when the role of providers of active leisure opportunities in helping to address wider societal challenges is increasingly recognised.

Getting Active, Staying Active links clearly with the Council's third Corporate Plan, which will see ***'progress towards A Sustainable Borough through innovation in our services and greater partnerships with our residents and other organisations.'***

Why We Need a Leisure Strategy

The link between being active and being healthy is well known yet there are sections of our community oblivious to the benefits of an active lifestyle or for whom the barriers to being active are too great. We need to be better at supporting people with the most to gain from being active whilst encouraging everyone to remain active throughout their life.

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 leisure provider 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.

The Big Plan [the Borough's Community Plan]

Getting Active, Staying Active is aligned with The Big Plan, which aims to ensure *all people in Ards and North Down*:

- ▶ enjoy good health and wellbeing.
- ▶ are respected and live in communities where they are safe and feel secure.
- ▶ feel pride from having access to a well-managed sustainable environment.

The Vision



Getting Active, Staying Active
A Leisure Strategy for Ards and North Down
where everyone can enjoy an active life

Themes and Outcomes

Getting Active, Staying Active focuses on four themes across a ten-year delivery period. The strategy will be delivered in stages, each stage having a detailed action plan with measurement of what has been achieved. The strategy has an initial two-year action plan. One of the KPIs during this two-year period is the formation of the Strategy Implementation Group who will oversee the delivery of the strategy and its ten-year action plan.

Theme

Outcome



Active Partnerships

All Council directorates or service areas 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 Ards and North Down population can 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 shared via both traditional and digital channels.



Active Support

Activity providers are supported in their work to deliver active leisure opportunities.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Getting Active, Staying Active	01
2. Living Better, Living Longer	03
3. What You Told Us	07
4. Why We Need a Leisure Strategy	17
5. The Strategy	23
6. What Next?	33

1. Getting Active, Staying Active

This is the first leisure strategy for Ards and North Down. Within the strategy 'leisure' is taken to mean *active leisure* – *anything that involves 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 as 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 encourage everyone to remain active throughout their life.

Geography of the Borough

The Borough's urban areas are Bangor City, Newtownards, Holywood, Comber and Donaghadee with many villages and small settlements 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 has led 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, while recognising that the Council provides the most opportunities for active leisure via its facilities and services across the Borough, including:

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



Annually, the Council's Leisure Service attracts around two million visits, a mix of members, 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 the Borough enjoy being active. Yet, like other Council areas there are health inequalities in Ards and North Down¹ depending on where people live. This can be seen in life expectancy at birth statistics:

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

Life Expectancy at Birth in AND		
	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 people, at whatever age, who are presently inactive or not active enough who will benefit most from becoming active and remaining active throughout their life. 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 and 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.'

² Future of Public Sector Leisure. Sport England 2022.

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 leisure provider 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. Living Better, Living Longer

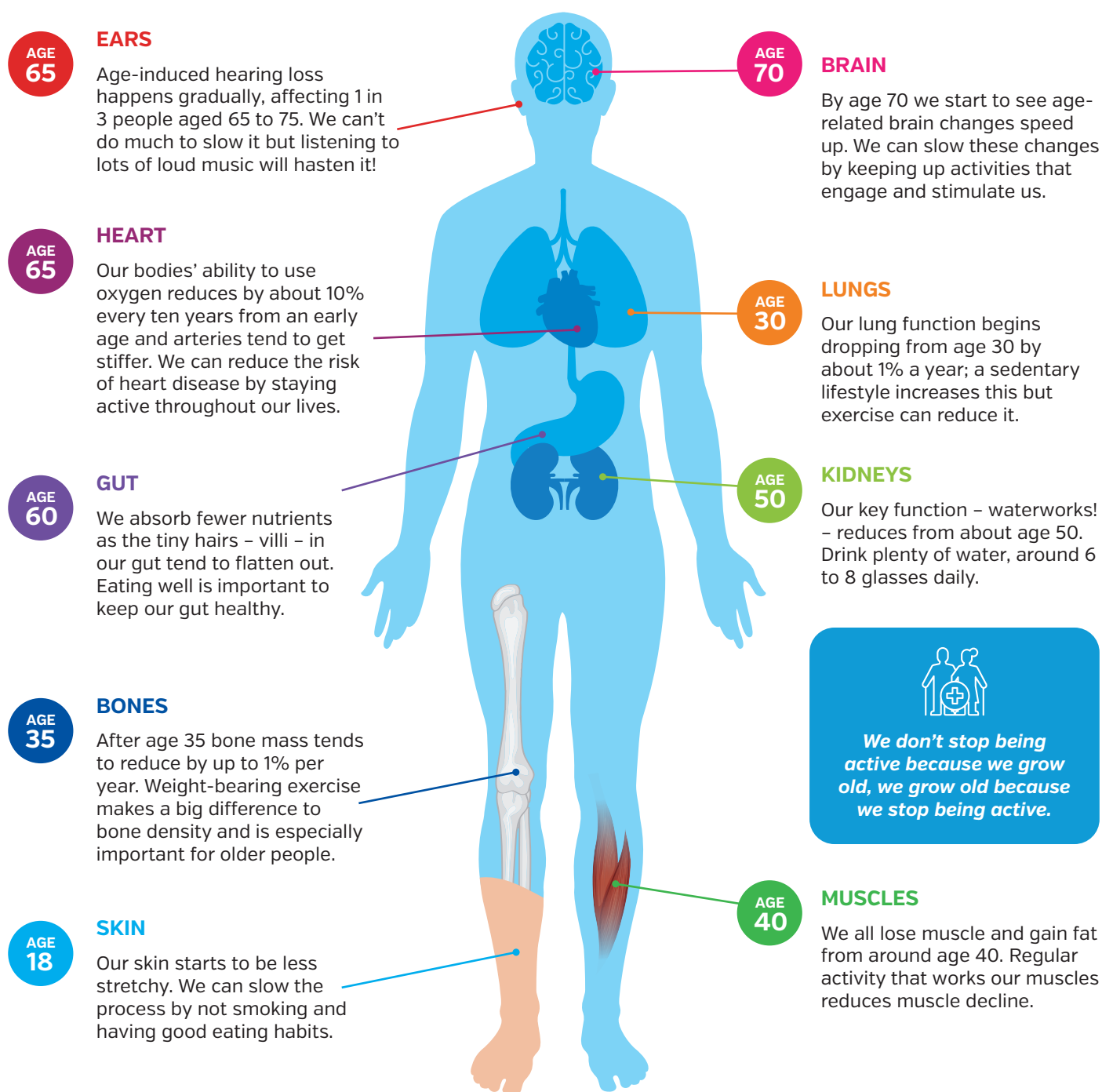


People living in Ards and North Down generally enjoy good health. Of the Department of Health's 32 measures of health analysed for Ards and North Down, 21 are better than and eleven are similar to the NI average; none are worse.³ Looking at life expectancy, even though the age profile of Ards and North Down is older than the NI average, women can expect to live 0.7 years beyond the NI average and men 1.6 years.

³ Health Inequalities: Annual Report 2024. Department of Health.

Here's a rough guide⁴ to what happens to our bodies as we age and what we can do to keep well.

⁴ Taken from an article in Time Magazine 2015.



Sit Less, Move More

Not everyone is 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.



Healthy is an outfit that looks different on everybody.



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

1. Enjoy your later years

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.

2. Wellbeing

Being active with family and friends encourages a sense of wellbeing and makes children feel good about themselves whilst reinforcing family bonds.

3. Energy

Whatever our age or ability, even small changes to our active lives will make us feel good and give us more energy.

4. Happier

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.

5. Reduce risk of major illnesses

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.

6. Health

Making active leisure a habit can help with breathing difficulties, high blood pressure and bone health.





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.'*⁵

⁵WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour (2020).



3. What You Told Us

During consultation for Getting Active, Staying Active we explored active leisure opportunities by speaking with and listening to groups and organisations who deliver activities, and people who participate in them.

We met with local communities across Ards and North Down, with Council staff and with organisations interested in getting people more active. We conducted three surveys to help inform the strategy:

- ▶ **Leisure Strategy Community Survey**
- ▶ **Activity Providers Survey**
- ▶ **Schools Survey**

What we learnt can be summarised as follows:



Partnerships are critical to the success of Getting Active, Staying Active.

The results from the 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 emerges as a barrier to participation in leisure activities, noted by activity providers and schools especially. This highlights the importance of creating affordable or subsidised leisure programmes to encourage broad community access.



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.



20,000

PEOPLE IN ARDS AND NORTH DOWN ARE INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY SPORTS CLUBS

In people's minds 'sport' usually conjures up competition, either as a team or as an individual. However, the community sports clubs' 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, educational 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.

A survey of the Borough's sports clubs undertaken by Sport NI in 2019/20 revealed *'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 Borough's 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.'*⁶

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

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 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.
- ▶ Create greater awareness of 'minority' sports.

Rhys McClenaghan



Olympic Gold Medallist:
Paris 2024.

Rhys first tried gymnastics at the 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 the following:

'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.'



Rhys trains at the Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex.

Leisure Strategy Community Survey

The survey, conducted as part of the Council's stakeholder engagement process, attracted an impressive 1,564 responses. This level of response is significant as it emphasises the importance that people living in Ards and North Down attach to leisure provision.

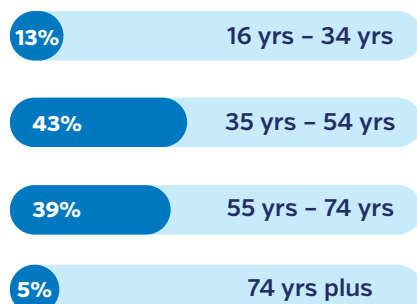
The survey questionnaire asked residents about how active they are, the activities they do, what they think about leisure provision and how important it is to them, the barriers they encounter to being active, and much more.

Age

The largest 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	%
16 yrs – 34 yrs	199	13%
35 yrs – 54 yrs	669	43%
55 yrs – 74 yrs	604	39%
74 yrs 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.¹⁰ A total of 121 respondents provided some detail on the nature of their condition. These include mobility issues, chronic conditions (e.g., Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, 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:

Frequency	%
Daily	18%
Several times a week	53%
Weekly	18%
Monthly	4%
Rarely	6%
Never	1%

⁷ The remainder chose not to respond.

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.

Leisure Activities

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

⁸ Respondents were able to 'tick all that apply' from a list of 38 activities.

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

Surveys

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. 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 *keep fit/aerobics/yoga*. People who have no gym membership tend to be less involved in structured activities, finding *walking for recreation* more accessible.



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 – 54 yrs 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

Bangor Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex and Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex

**WE ARE
MACMILLAN.**
CANCER SUPPORT

Macmillan Move More

At Bangor Aurora Aquatic and 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:

- ▶ '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 and 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.



Age Range	Biggest Barrier	Second Biggest Barrier
16 to 34 yrs	Time	Money
35 to 54 yrs	Time	Lack of facilities /activities
55 yrs 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
- 44%** Council 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' (Department for Communities) and 'The Power of Sport' (Sport NI) recognise this development and seek to sustain its growth.



Tourism and Green/Blue Spaces in Ards and North Down

Tourism Northern Ireland's recent research (October 2024) rates scenic walks as the second highest 'what visitors do on holiday' activity, complementing commercial activity and leisure offerings available in Ards and North Down. Tourists place a good deal of importance on wellness in what they do with resulting benefits to economic returns, in line with the economic priority in the Council's Corporate Plan.

Activity Providers Survey

A total of 66 activity providers – community sports clubs and groups and charitable organisations – responded to the activity providers survey which questioned them on a range of issues. Of these, 60 groups gave information on their membership size.

Membership Size Range	Number of Groups	Approx. Total Members	
		Number	% 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 estimated, 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 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 (e.g., Ards Table Tennis Club, Let's Do Pilates) to organising large-scale events (e.g., Swim Ulster for national swimming competitions). These collaborations span 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 and governing bodies like Peninsula Triathlon Club and NI Orienteering benefit from sports development event grants and from the Council's assistance with event logistics, such as securing venues, road closures and promotional support. Additionally, 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.

The survey questionnaire addressed the possibility of groups partnering with the Council; it 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.

Outdoor Locations

This emphasises the importance of the leisure strategy embracing outdoor locations and facilities, a point made by Sport England in stating 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 results suggest that activity providers deal mostly with in-person activities.



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 that 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 should 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 is one response by way of example:

ACTION MENTAL HEALTH

'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 e.g., community, arts, wellbeing etc.'

This response and other activity providers' survey responses 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, six post primary) responded to the survey. Seven of the 22 schools deliver leisure, sport or wellbeing activities in association with the Council; a further eleven schools deliver these activities independently. Portavogie Primary School advised:

'We have girls' football sessions and P5 and P7 swim weekly in Blair Mayne. As part of our extended schools funding we run:

- an after-school football club for P2 to P7;
- an after-school rounders club for P5 to P7 girls;
- we host a football and rounders tournament each year – 13 primary schools attend;
- we are introducing an after-school gymnastics club for P1 to P7!

Community Use

In respect of 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 advised they don't have the capacity (staff, volunteers, facilities) to accommodate community use.

Partnerships

Nearly all of the schools (95%) 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.⁹ 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 are 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 referenced 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.

⁹ The remaining 10% of schools did not respond to this question.

Active Youth NI



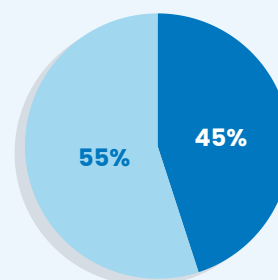
Photo courtesy of Active Youth NI

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

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 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.'**

45%

of schools open their facilities for community use



4. 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.¹⁰

¹⁰ Future of Public Sector Leisure. Sport England 2022.

In recent years, providers of active leisure opportunities 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, but it is only by working in effective partnership with a wide range of providers of active leisure 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.'**¹¹ Recognition of the connection between engaging in active leisure and positive health outcomes has never been stronger, as demonstrated in the following regional and local strategies.

¹¹ The Great Age Reboot; Michael Roizen.



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. Getting Active, Staying Active 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. A key challenge for the leisure strategy is establishing effective partnerships on a number of levels that can share responsibility for delivery.



There needs to be a focus on older people, children, females and on people with a disability. 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 and people with a disability 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.

This leisure strategy is needed now more than ever before to help tackle the health inequalities that impact on individuals and on society. The health sector's prevention programmes focus on the health risks associated with obesity, alcohol and smoking. Being more active can lead to people adopting a healthier lifestyle, helping to reduce these health risks and generating social and economic value for individuals, communities and society. The strategies reviewed here emphasise the need for Getting Active, Staying Active to address these challenges.

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.'*

There are four Missions contained within PfG, one of which focuses on People, as follows:

PEOPLE

Working to support everyone at all stages of their life to ensure they have the chance to succeed by improving life opportunities.

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 that 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.'

The challenge for all stakeholders 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.

KEY THEMES

- 1 Recovering from the impact of the pandemic
- 2 Promoting participation, inclusion and community engagement
- 3 Promoting excellence in sport
- 4 Promoting partnership and integration
- 5 Providing inclusive, shared spaces and places
- 6 Promoting the benefits of sport and physical activity

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 estimated direct cost of physical inactivity to the NHS across the UK is £1.2 billion.



The CASE programme* with over 12,000 studies on engagement in culture and sport found: Young people's participation in sport improves their numeracy scores by 8% on average above non-participants.

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



Underachieving young people who take part in sport see a 29% increase in numeracy skills and a 12-16% rise in other transferable skills.



Returns on investment in sports programmes for at-risk youth are estimated at £7.35 of social benefit for every £1 spent – through financial savings to the police, the criminal justice system and the community.



The benefits of Outdoor Recreation in NI: Taking central and local government as a whole, spending of £47m is associated with a generated income of £83m, a surplus of 43%. For every £1 that the public sector invests in outdoor recreation there is a return of £1.77.

The Power of Sport has two strategic outcomes:



OUTCOME ONE

People adopting and sustaining participation in sport and physical activity.



OUTCOME TWO

Our athletes among the best in the world

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 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 1	All people in Ards and North Down benefit from opportunities to fulfil their lifelong potential.
Outcome 2	All people in Ards and North Down benefit from being equipped to enjoy good health and wellbeing.
Outcome 3	All people in Ards and North Down benefit from communities where they are respected, are safe and feel secure.
Outcome 4	All people in Ards and North Down benefit from a prosperous and inclusive economy.
Outcome 5	All people in Ards and North Down benefit from an environment that is valued, well-managed and accessible.



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 the following three priorities, supported by seven outcomes.

- 1. ECONOMIC:** Increasing economic growth by attracting more businesses and jobs.
- 2. ENVIRONMENTAL:** Reducing carbon emissions as we transition to net zero.
- 3. SOCIAL:** Improving wellbeing through social inclusion and reduced inequality.

Of the Corporate Plan's seven 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:

Outcome 6

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

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.

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 leisure service staff, sports coaches, fitness instructors and personal trainers.

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 social value is generated.¹²

¹² Sport England 2020 (Sport England research is referenced in the absence of similar data for Northern Ireland).

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

Becoming Age Friendly is a priority for the Borough, not least because Ards and North Down's population has a larger 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:

- **Respect and Inclusion**
- **Social Participation**
- **Outdoor Spaces and Buildings**

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

Ards and North Down Local Development Plan (LDP) 2032: Draft Plan Strategy

The Council is formulating its Local Development Plan which will guide the future use of land within the Borough and inform developers, members of the public, communities, government, public bodies, representative organisations and other interested parties of the policy framework that will be used to determine planning applications. The draft Plan Strategy (first document of the LDP) is due to be published for public consultation this year and shall include a strategic policy approach and operational planning policy for Open Space and Outdoor Recreation. The draft Plan Strategy will be accompanied by a technical supplement which will include an Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation strategy reflecting the aim, objectives and policy approach of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, tailored to the specific circumstances of the Borough. This includes an assessment of existing open space provision against established standards and the distribution and accessibility of such spaces.



Respect and Inclusion



Social Participation



Outdoor Spaces and Buildings



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

A Whole Systems Approach 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 Borough Council is the first early adopter in taking a Whole Systems 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.



5. The Strategy

Vision

Research and consultation have provided statistical insights into what people feel is important in creating a leisure strategy for Ards and North Down. 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:



Getting Active, Staying Active
A Leisure Strategy for Ards and North Down
where everyone can enjoy an active life

Strategy

Getting Active, Staying Active is led by the Council and delivered in partnership with a wide range of agencies, organisations and groups that 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 set within the context of the Council's Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 and its three overlapping priorities:



These priorities are interlinked and Getting Active, Staying Active makes an important contribution to each one. Living an active lifestyle helps us to be healthier and happier whatever our circumstances or age, benefiting our physical and mental wellbeing, our community development and our economic development. Being active every day helps us and our communities to thrive, contributing to the Council's vision of A Sustainable Borough. Research by Sport England¹³ estimates that the average wellbeing value of sport and physical activity to *fairly active* individuals, per person, per year is:

All adults [16+]	Children & young people [11-16yrs]
£1,200	£3,100

¹³ 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.

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+]	Age 16 to 64	Age 65+
£230	£196	£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.'

Four Strategic Themes

The strategy will focus on four themes across the ten-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 ten years, giving it every chance to deliver actions that make an appreciable difference in the lives of everyone living in Ards and North Down.



Active Partnerships



Active Opportunities



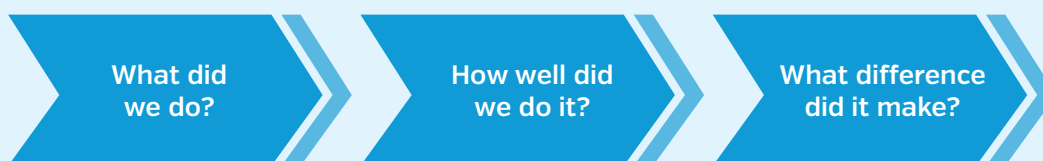
Active Communications



Active Support

Theme	Outcome
► Active Partnerships	All Council directorates or service areas 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 Ards and North Down population can 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 shared via both traditional and digital channels.
► Active Support	Activity providers are supported in their work to deliver active leisure opportunities.

Getting Active, Staying Active will be delivered in a series of action plans. The first of these is to be delivered over two years to facilitate the creation of a Strategy Implementation Group who will then produce future one year action plans. This allows regular assessment of the strategy's impact. It also allows each plan to take account of what has been achieved in the previous year 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 who also share 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, Disability Sport NI, sport's 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 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 active partnerships 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 being active contributes to a better society. That's why government directs its departments and agencies to work in partnership in promoting active lifestyles. 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 the strategy, 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

Strategic Actions

- ▶ **Build on existing and develop new 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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **Consider partnerships with activity provider groups** especially groups that 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 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.
- ▶ **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 being sustained throughout the strategy period.
New partners	More and different partners are involved in collective leisure provision, working in new and innovative ways across a range of locations to promote active leisure.
Shared Access	The number of education sites making facilities available to the community for active leisure has increased.



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.

Having listened to what people said about provision for active leisure we better understand how the ten-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 have to 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. They 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. Being self-conscious, *'bored with the same old things'* and age (over 60) can also be barriers. The key learning point is that in knowing what holds people back from being more active, leisure providers can help address the barriers.

Whether it's 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.



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!

Strategic Actions

- ▶ **Give a greater focus to hard to reach groups** – women and girls, people with a disability or long-term illness, older people, young people. It's often the case that they are less active than society in general yet they can benefit the most. Getting Active, Staying Active will seek to encourage and enable these groups towards a more active lifestyle by offering active opportunities that suit their needs.
- ▶ **Widen access to active opportunities throughout the Borough.** This approach focuses on tailoring services to meet specific local need and ensuring activities are located where they can have the most impact.
- ▶ **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. Spreading opportunities for active leisure throughout the day and across the week enables more people to participate.
- ▶ **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. Getting Active, Staying Active presents an opportunity to encourage existing and new organisations to include active leisure opportunities in their work.

Success Factors

More people enjoy active leisure	An increase in regular participation in active leisure.
Flexible scheduling of active leisure opportunities	Weekday delivery – before 5.00pm – of active leisure opportunities by activity providers increases.
Growth in active leisure opportunities for the wider community	An increase in delivery of opportunities in community centres/sports clubs and parks and open spaces.



Theme 3 Active Communications

Consultation responses 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.

It is 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 that 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 exclusion. 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.'

ANDBC Leisure Strategy Community Survey 2024. _____



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

Strategic Actions

- ▶ **Challenge the myth that active lifestyles are all about sport.** Agencies tasked with promoting sport now include physical activity and wellbeing in their marketing and programmes. This is an important development that Getting Active, Staying Active embraces. Messaging will have a focus on physical activity and wellbeing, ensuring no-one feels left out.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **Ensure Getting Active, Staying Active is promoted across all Council services.** There are already excellent examples of active leisure opportunities promoted in environmental health, tourism and parks. It's important that Getting Active, Staying Active integrates with the Council's many and varied functions.

Success Factors

Awareness of the benefits	There is a better understanding of the benefits of participating in active leisure, contributing to increased participation.
Improved access to information	People find it easier to get information about active leisure opportunities, again contributing to increased participation.



Theme 4 Active Support

In Ards and North Down Borough, 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 being active.

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.

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; but others such as softball, pickleball and open water swimming need more support to become better known. 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 associated lockdowns led to a resurgence in appreciation of outdoor spaces including forests, beaches, parks and waterways. 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. In sports clubs alone in AND it's estimated there are over 4,000 volunteers [about 60% male, 40% female] delivering active leisure opportunities to around 12% of the population.

'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 overestimated. This includes the importance of government departments, local Councils, sport's 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.

Strategic Actions

- ▶ **Support 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. Volunteers are needed in all age groups.
 - ▶ **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.
 - ▶ **Support 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.
 - ▶ **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 AND.¹⁴
- ¹⁴ Club Survey 2019/2020 – A Headline Report for Ards and North Down. Sport NI.
- ▶ **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 addressing 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.
 - ▶ **Promote innovative monitoring and evaluation.** Modern methods of monitoring and evaluation follow the principle of Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) – 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.

Success Factors

Volunteering skills are enhanced	Whether it's digital technology, monitoring & evaluation or governance, activity providers think differently and are more resilient to challenges.
Activity providers are more financially sustainable	Greater confidence in AND sports clubs being able to meet financial demands.
Growth in use of green/blue spaces	An increase in the use of green/blue spaces.
Gap between male and female volunteers in sports clubs is narrowed	An increase in the number of female volunteers engaged in active leisure.
Gap in participation of adults in sport depending on where people live is narrowed	The gap in participation in sport between adults living in the most and the least deprived areas is reduced.

6. What Next?

Getting Active, Staying Active puts in place four strategic themes and high-level actions that reflect what survey respondents stated is needed to improve the provision of active leisure opportunities across the Borough.

Now the Council needs to breathe life into the strategy and monitor how it is making a difference in people's lives. The Council needs a way to deliver the strategy, monitor it 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, activity providers and communities working together in effective partnerships. This is not a Council strategy, rather, it is a strategy for the Borough so it requires buy-in and commitment from statutory and non-statutory organisations that are also striving 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 and Thematic Implementation
2. Monitoring and Reporting of this Ten-year Action Plan
3. Monitoring and Reporting of this Two-year Action Plan



Strategic Implementation

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 Strategy Implementation Group will advise on and support the implementation of the strategy. The Strategy Implementation Group's role is also to develop annual plans including targets. Members will agree a suitable format for the group, its terms of reference and 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. The Strategy Implementation Group will include Council staff across directorates (and/or contracted partners) to ensure the strategy has internal ownership and is effective across and between service units, complementing and supplementing all relevant Council strategies and plans.

THEMATIC WORKING GROUPS

Establish thematic working groups. The task of the thematic working groups is to advise on and support the delivery of the Action Plans and priorities agreed by the Strategy Implementation Group. Their role is operational so each one will involve people with skills and experience relating to the working group. 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

Council will measure progress towards the strategy outcomes using a combination of whole population Big Plan indicators (e.g., gap in life expectancy/obesity rates), Council specific performance measures and repeating surveys which informed the strategy. Council will use a range of methods to monitor the implementation and impact of the strategy as detailed in the tables that follow.

Ten-Year Action Plan

The below table outlines actions to be completed across the strategy implementation period.

Theme 1 - Active Partnerships			
Outcome	Success Factors	Target/KPI	Year/s
Theme 1 Active Partnerships	Everyone working together. Strong and effective partnerships are in place, making a difference, and being sustained throughout the strategy period.	Strategy Implementation Group reporting annually on the delivery of the leisure strategy.	Year 1 onwards
		Thematic working groups delivering an annual work plan.	Year 1 onwards
		Internal and external funding secured to enable the delivery of the leisure strategy.	Year 1 onwards
	New partners. More and different partners are involved in collective leisure provision, working in new and innovative ways across a range of locations to promote active leisure.	Two new community organisation partnerships (operating in areas of deprivation) established annually, and delivery undertaken.	Year 1 onwards
		A database of leisure providers created and updated annually.	Year 2 onwards
		Two new leisure provider partnerships established annually and formal agreements in place.	Year 2 onwards
		An active leisure workshop to report on the progress of the strategy and to ensure partners are fully engaged.	Year 3 onwards
	Shared access. The number of education sites making facilities available to the community for active leisure has increased.	Develop and promote a process to assist activity providers to lease Council facilities for leisure delivery.	Year 1 onwards
		An additional one school annually offering community use of their facilities outside curriculum time.	Year 2 onwards

Theme 3 - Active Communications			
Outcome	Success Factors	Target/KPI	Year/s
Theme 3 Active Communications Better awareness of opportunities for active leisure through a mix of general and targeted information, shared via both traditional and digital channels.	Awareness of the benefits. There is a better understanding of the benefits of participating in active leisure, contributing to increased participation.	'I feel my age [over 60] is a barrier' reduced from 8% to 4% of survey population as a final target.	Year 1 onwards
		Develop and implement a marketing and communications plan for the leisure strategy.	Year 1 onwards
		Develop and implement a social value benefits framework for leisure provision.	Year 1 onwards
		As the preferred way to let people know about active leisure opportunities, social media platforms increase from 75% to 80% of survey population as a final target.	Year 10
	Improved access to information. People find it easier to get information about active leisure opportunities, again contributing to increased participation.	'Don't know what is on in my area' as a barrier to participation reduced from 19% to 15% of survey population.	Year 10

Theme 4 - Active Support			
Outcome	Success Factors	Target/KPI	Year/s
Theme 4 Active Support Activity providers are supported in their work to deliver active leisure opportunities.	Volunteering skills are enhanced. Whether it's digital technology, monitoring & evaluation or governance, activity providers think differently and are more resilient to challenges.	Training needs identified, programmes developed and delivered to 50 activity provider groups.	Year 10
		Increased collaboration between activity providers. Ten pairings of activity providers set up in a 'Buddy' project.	Year 10
	Activity providers are more financially sustainable. Greater confidence in AND sports clubs being able to meet financial demands.	Develop and deliver an enhanced sport capital scheme to assist clubs/groups to develop and sustain their own leased leisure facilities.	Year 10
		Targeted revenue support programme for activity providers in place.	Year 10
		Support and guidance provided to activity providers to improve financial sustainability. Confidence in meeting financial demands (sports clubs) increases from 68% to 80%.	Year 10
	Growth in use of green/blue spaces. An increase in the use of green/blue spaces.	Increased use of green and blue spaces from 49% to 65% of survey respondents.	Year 10
	Gap between male and female volunteers in sports clubs is narrowed. An increase in the number of female volunteers engaged in active leisure.	Increase the number of female volunteers in sports clubs from 41% of all volunteers to 50%.	Year 10
	Gap in participation of adults in sport depending on where people live is narrowed. The gap in participation in sport between adults living in the most and the least deprived areas is reduced.	Identify two deprived areas and deliver a programme of active leisure opportunities in each area.	Year 1 onwards

Two-Year Action Plan

The below table details actions to be completed in the first two years of the strategy implementation period.

Theme 1 (Years 1-2) - Active Partnerships		
Outcome	Success Factors	Years 1-2 Target/KPI
Theme 1 Active Partnerships <p>All Council directorates or service areas and relevant external organisations have ownership of the strategy and are committed to its delivery. The strategy's potential is realised.</p>	Everyone working together. Strong and effective partnerships are in place, making a difference, and being sustained throughout the strategy period.	Strategy Implementation Group established. In doing so, establish and agree governance arrangements to be adopted by all members of the Strategy Implementation Group.
		Thematic working groups established as required. In doing so, establish and agree governance arrangements to be adopted by all members.
		Resources secured for Years 1-2 identified workstreams.
		Resources secured by ANDBC and partners to deliver the strategy in Year 2 onwards.
		Monitoring and reporting framework developed and circulated to partners.
		Further leisure activity provider baseline analysis completed.
		Database of partners in the Borough for the co-delivery of the strategy developed.
	New partners. More and different partners are involved in collective leisure provision, working in new and innovative ways across a range of locations to promote active leisure.	Two new leisure provider partnerships and formal agreements in place.
		A review of what support is provided to activity providers and develop actions for Years 2-5.
		Two new community organisations (operating in areas of deprivation) partnerships established annually, and delivery undertaken.
		One sport identified and engaged with to develop a sport specific strategy for that sport within the Borough.
		Refined and finalised sport specific strategy model from the first sport to develop Borough strategies for additional sports.
		An information session for all sports activity providers on the opportunity to be supported on the development of a sport specific strategy.
	Shared access. The number of education sites making facilities available to the community for active leisure has increased.	An audit of schools offering community use of their facilities outside curriculum time.
		One new agreement in place with schools to offer community use of their facilities outside curriculum time.
		Develop a process to assist active leisure providers to lease Council-owned facilities.

Theme 2 (Years 1-2) - Active Opportunities		
Outcome	Success Factors	Years 1-2 Target/KPI
Theme 2 Active Opportunities All sections of the Ards and North Down population can access active leisure opportunities that suit their age, abilities, interests and circumstances.	More people enjoy active leisure. An increase in regular participation in active leisure.	A Sports Facility Strategy for Council-owned facilities 2026 – 2035 to be developed.
		A mechanism developed to identify with funding agencies to keep leisure partners within the Borough aware of upcoming funding opportunities linked to the strategy and the priorities determined by the Strategy Implementation Group.
		One link between a school and a sport club will be developed.
		Develop a plan to increase the number of people in sports clubs.
	Flexible scheduling of active leisure opportunities. Weekday delivery – before 5.00pm – of active leisure opportunities by activity providers increases.	Review of all Council-owned facilities carried out with scheduling recommendations implemented.
		Engagement with activity providers to encourage weekday before 5.00pm leisure programming and delivery.
	Growth in active leisure opportunities for the wider community. An increase in delivery of opportunities in community centres/sports clubs and parks and open spaces.	A targeted active leisure pilot initiative delivered in an area of deprivation to encourage local residents to be more active.
		A programme developed to provide support to activity providers to establish Getting Active, Staying Active sites for Year 2 onwards based on the pilot projects.

Theme 3 (Years 1-2) - Active Communications		
Outcome	Success Factors	Years 1-2 Target/KPI
Theme 3 Active Communications	Awareness of the benefits. There is a better understanding of the benefits of participating in active leisure, contributing to increased participation.	Marketing communications plan delivered to launch the strategy and raise awareness of aims/ objectives and opportunities with key stakeholders and target audience.
		Develop a marketing communications plan for the leisure strategy.
	Improved access to information. People find it easier to get information about active leisure opportunities, again contributing to increased participation.	Conduct a leisure communications gap analysis.
		Develop a marketing communications plan for the leisure strategy.

Theme 4 (Years 1-2) - Active Support		
Outcome	Success Factors	Years 1-2 Target/KPI
Theme 4 Active Support	Volunteering skills are enhanced. Whether it's digital technology, monitoring & evaluation or governance, activity providers think differently and are more resilient to challenges.	A survey of support provided to active leisure volunteers, needs analysed, and a three-year delivery plan developed.
	Activity providers are more financially sustainable. Greater confidence in AND sports clubs being able to meet financial demands.	A review carried out of the financial position and needs of non-commercial/voluntary-led activity providers.
		A programme developed to support the non-commercial / voluntary led activity providers to be more financially sustainable.
		Establish a resource to identify and distribute grant opportunities.
	Growth in use of green/blue spaces. An increase in the use of green/blue spaces.	Establish a baseline for the use of green and blue spaces.
	Gap between male and female volunteers in sports clubs is narrowed. An increase in the number of female volunteers engaged in active leisure.	A survey of support provided to female active leisure volunteers, needs analysed, and a three-year delivery plan developed.
	Gap in participation of adults in sport depending on where people live is narrowed. The gap in participation in sport between adults living in the most and the least deprived areas is reduced.	Identify two deprived areas and deliver a programme of active leisure opportunities in each area.

Getting Active, Staying Active

LEISURE STRATEGY 2025 - 2034



**Ards and
North Down**
Borough Council

www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk
0300 013 3333

For further information please
contact us online or by phone.

*Illustrations: Freepik/Vecteezy
Icons: The Noun Project*