

+ HEALTHY GAINS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

by **Luke Abbott**, Studio Director
Stephen George + Partners



With local leisure centres and swimming pools in a period of crisis, Luke Abbott, Studio Director at Stephen George + Partners, examines how private-sector businesses are looking to mitigate the impact by providing their own health and wellness facilities for staff.

In June this year, almost 100 residents in the Lancashire town of Whitworth rolled up at a district council meeting to protest the closure of their local leisure centre. It's loss, they said, would be particularly felt by those who used the gym and pool to keep fit, lose weight and improve their overall wellbeing, whilst also creating barriers to their children's chances of learning to swim. Sadly, the protests were to no avail and the centre, with its gym and swimming pool, closed in July.

The closure of Whitworth Leisure Centre is just one of many public leisure facilities that are either restricting services or closing permanently due to budget pressures and rising energy costs and builds upon previous challenges stemming from enforced closures and loss of revenue during the Covid pandemic. A recent survey of more than a third of all UK leisure centres and swimming pools found that

40% of council areas are at risk of losing or seeing reduced services at their leisure centres this year.

The closure of these public facilities could not come at a worse time, as concern grows about the state of the UK public's health and the NHS's ability to cope with diseases closely linked to obesity and sedentary ways of living. According to research by Cancer Research UK, more than 42 million adults in the UK could be overweight or obese by 2040 and at higher risk of 13 types of cancer.

As part of its effort to crack down on obesity and reduce pressure on the health service, the Government has launched a £40m pilot to trial weight loss jabs on the NHS. However, clinicians and health experts maintain that exercising regularly is the single most important thing you can do for your health. Research by Swim England and Sheffield Hallam University shows that swimming alone helps save the health and social care system more than £357m a year. The nationwide loss of accessible and affordable options to help people live active, healthier lives and keep them out of hospital can therefore be seen as nothing short of a tragedy.

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If there's a glimmer of hope for the nation's health and fitness, it is that private-sector employers are beginning to understand the harm that can be caused to their workforce by long sedentary hours at work (whether in the office or at home) and the social value of providing wellness facilities that their staff may not otherwise be able to access.



While it has long been the case that some employers choose to include gym membership as part of their remuneration packages, an increasing number of businesses are introducing corporate fitness and wellness programmes that encourage more active lifestyles within the workplace itself. This also extends to the planning, development or fit out of their properties to provide sport and leisure facilities within, or connected to, the workplace, providing social functions that might have previously been accommodated in a local leisure centre.

It's also worth noting that, in addressing the issues of access and affordability that the closure of public leisure facilities creates, in-house gym facilities can be offered to employees tax-free and at a convenient location to fit in around work. This is unlike a gym membership, which is considered a 'Benefit in Kind' by HMRC and is subject to tax.

It's interesting to see how this is playing out on the ground. Many of our large strategic employment masterplans, for instance, now feature a trim trail or health circuit that circumnavigates the site, with informal seating areas, gathering pavilions and fitness stops. Additionally, the utilisation of the drainage attenuation to form attractive blue infrastructure that has ecological, visual, social and wellbeing value in addition to its primary technical function. Elsewhere, we are seeing larger employers providing gymnasiums and multi-use games areas as part of their amenity offer in their headquarter workplaces.



For many of the enlightened funds, developers and operators with whom we work, people-first policies have become the focus and **Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)** factors are starting to drive improvements in their property portfolios. Many of these businesses understand the health crisis we are facing and, in re-thinking their real estate assets, private-sector owners and developers are ensuring that the built environment can play an important role in the prevention of diseases caused by obesity and sedentary lifestyles, as well as other pressing public health issues.

There has been a noticeable shift in exemplar workplace design towards a golden thread of employee's health, wellbeing, and happiness, and for good reason: **people are every organisation's greatest asset** and buildings, where it's estimated we spend some 90% of

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our time, should be designed to support the wellbeing of the people who occupy them.

Employers, architects, interior designers and furniture designers have all taken note of the relationship between motivation and productivity, and health and wellbeing in the workplace. A happy employee is shown to reduce absenteeism and improve staff-retention rates. By improving staff wellbeing, employers can significantly reduce unwelcomed staff turnover and absenteeism whilst improving output, productivity, efficiency, and innovation. Therefore, wellness and amenity have a greater influence on decision making and capital expenditure than in times past.

In addition, architects and developers are now utilising more narrative health and wellbeing standards as part of a comprehensive approach to design. The WELL Building Standard®, for example, recognises the physical activity-promoting policies and design strategies that can be implemented in the built environment to encourage physical activity and reduce sedentariness, thus helping to combat obesity and other chronic diseases. A well-designed contemporary workspace should also cultivate social wellbeing by providing flexible spaces in the office for community socialisation and assembly, group meeting and collaboration and individual restoration.

The renewed focus on staff wellbeing has seen a democratisation of workplace wellness facilities. The provision of a workplace gym is no longer the preserve of the trophy headquarters for use by senior executives,

but a space for all employees; a community space that encourages healthy behaviours and promotes mental and physical wellbeing. Even within smaller or existing buildings, it is possible to offer gym, yoga or other leisure space to working environments with minimal upheaval provided that an employer can submit a meeting room to be repurposed.



While the continued loss of public sport and leisure centres should remain a concern for everyone, it is encouraging to see progressive private-sector employers going some way to mitigate these losses by providing their staff with quality health and wellbeing facilities. In carefully considering the planning and design of their buildings to include wellness facilities, commercial owners and occupiers can take an active frontline position in the prevention of some of our most pressing public health issues, while offering appealing workspaces that attract and retain staff and ensure a healthy and productive workforce.

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