

# Healthy Life Expectancy Trends in the UK: A Watershed Moment

To: all local authorities in UK

## 1 Overview

A recent analysis by The Health Foundation has highlighted a significant decline in healthy life expectancy (HLE) across the UK, with widening inequalities between affluent and deprived communities.<sup>1</sup> The report describes the findings as a “watershed moment” for public health policy and raises important implications for local government services, prevention activity and wider community wellbeing.

Healthy life expectancy measures the average number of years a person can expect to live in good health, rather than simply how long they live. The report finds that between 2012–14 and 2022–24, healthy life expectancy fell by around two years across the UK, to approximately 60.7 years for men and 60.9 years for women.

The findings reinforce concerns around growing health inequalities, increasing pressure on local services and the wider economic impact of poor health.

## 2 Background

The analysis shows that the majority of local areas across England, Scotland and Wales experienced a decline in healthy life expectancy over the past decade. In more than 90% of local areas, healthy life expectancy is now below the State Pension age of 66. In over one in ten local authority areas, healthy life expectancy has fallen below 55 years.

The report also highlights stark geographical inequalities. In England, the gap in healthy life expectancy between the most deprived and least deprived communities has widened to around 20 years for both men and women.

While overall life expectancy has remained relatively stable, people are spending a greater proportion of their lives in poor health. The decline appears to be driven less by mortality rates and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/analysis/healthy-life-expectancy-trends-in-the-uk-a-watershed-moment>

more by worsening self-reported physical and mental health, particularly among working-age populations.

Internationally, the UK's position has also deteriorated. Of 21 high-income countries examined in the report, the UK fell from 14th to 20th place for healthy life expectancy between 2011 and 2021.

The Health Foundation argues that these trends are linked to wider determinants of health, including poverty, insecure employment, housing quality, access to green space and reductions in preventative public services.

### **3 Implication for councils**

The findings have significant implications for local government.

Councils are increasingly dealing with the consequences of worsening population health through rising demand for adult social care, homelessness services, environmental health interventions and leisure and wellbeing provision. Poor health outcomes also affect councils as employers, contributing to workforce pressures and economic inactivity within communities.

The report further underlines the importance of preventative and place-based approaches to public health. Local authorities play a critical role in shaping the wider determinants of health through planning, housing, transport, green spaces as well as leisure provision.

There are particular implications for local economic growth strategies. The report notes that worsening health among working-age adults is creating both economic and fiscal pressures, with poor health increasingly acting as a barrier to labour market participation.

The findings also closely align with APSE's own 2025 State of the Market survey for Sports and Leisure Management, which found that 97% of local authority respondents agreed that "leisure's future lies in its integration with health."<sup>2</sup> The survey also highlighted growing demand pressures on leisure services, ageing infrastructure and increasing concern around affordability and access.

APSE's survey found that councils are increasingly positioning leisure centres as frontline preventative health assets, with growing integration between local authority leisure services, public health teams and NHS partners. This includes expanded exercise referral schemes, falls prevention programmes and wider community wellbeing services delivered through leisure settings.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2025/25-43-state-of-the-market-in-sports-and-leisure/>

## **4 APSE Comment**

The findings of this report should serve as a serious warning to policymakers at every level of government. Healthy life expectancy is a key measure not only of public health, but of the effectiveness of wider social, economic and environmental policy.

The conclusions strongly reinforce evidence from APSE's own Sports and Leisure Management State of the Market survey, which identified a growing consensus across councils that local leisure services are becoming a core part of the preventative health system.

APSE's research found that almost all councils surveyed now see the future of leisure as being directly tied to health and wellbeing integration, while many authorities are expanding partnerships with Integrated Care Systems, Health Boards and NHS providers. At the same time, councils reported increasing usage levels for gyms, swimming lessons, exercise referral schemes and targeted wellbeing programmes, demonstrating rising demand for preventative and community-based health interventions.

However, the Health Foundation report also exposes the risks of failing to invest adequately in these local preventative services. APSE's leisure survey identified a growing infrastructure challenge, with 53% of councils reporting that their leisure facilities now require refurbishment.

The fact that healthy life expectancy has now fallen below pension age in most local areas demonstrates the urgent need for a more preventative approach across public services. Local councils are already delivering much of this work through parks, leisure centres, active travel initiatives, environmental services and wider community wellbeing programmes, but they require long-term funding certainty and recognition as key partners within the national public health system.

The report also demonstrates the importance of tackling inequalities between places. APSE's leisure survey found that councils continue to subsidise services and provide targeted discounts for low-income residents, older people, disabled users and young people in order to maintain access and reduce barriers to participation. These interventions are increasingly important given the widening health inequalities identified in the Health Foundation analysis.

### **How can APSE help?**

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Sports and Leisure Management Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider sports and leisure sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

## **4.1 Benchmarking for your sports and leisure service**

APSE Performance Networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking organisation in the UK. With over 200 authorities in membership, Performance Networks assists local councils by:

- Demonstrating progression on carbon reduction/ecological actions
- Helping to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identifying the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assessing the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Helping to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identifying direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.
- Identifying inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.
- Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples.

For more information about how your leisure service can benefit from Performance Networks membership, click [here](#).

**Matt Ellis**  
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## Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email [enquiries@apse.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@apse.org.uk).

Our national networks include:-

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- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
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