



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt. Hon Mark Drakeford MS
First Minister of Wales
Welsh Parliament,
Cardiff Bay,
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

13th October 2020

Dear Mark,

Re: Keeping gym and leisure facilities open

I am writing to request that the Welsh Government recognises the integral role that gyms and leisure facilities play in the physical and mental wellbeing of communities, and to implore you not to make the decision to once again close down this vital sector as local authority restrictions are being implemented throughout Wales. When considering the increased safety measures that have been implemented to ensure the safety of all users within these facilities, it is important that they are recognised as such in order to reassure constituents and allow them to reap the benefits of physical activity, but also to ensure that local gyms and leisure facilities do not collapse due to lack of revenue.

By closing gym and leisure facilities, the Welsh Government would be removing an integral part of local communities in Wales, especially as approximately 32% of adults participate in sporting activity three times a week or more (806,000 people) and 8% participate approximately twice a week (203,000 people). The National Survey for Wales found that 405,000 people go to gyms or fitness classes, and 279,000 people using indoor swimming facilities. It would therefore be myopic to disregard the intrinsic value of gym, pool and leisure facilities to the wellbeing of the people of Wales, especially when considering that participation of these activities is directly linked to consistent personal well-being including both physical and mental health, and that the closure would have an adverse effect.

Research has proven that increased physical activity can reduce the risk of having serious symptoms of COVID-19. The Centre for Perioperative Care (CPOC) found that exercising and having a healthy diet significantly reduces the risk of becoming severely ill with the virus, suggesting that staying fit could reduce individual chances of being admitted to intensive care with COVID-19. This can be exemplified by research that has found that regular physical activity reduces the risk of developing major chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers by 50%, and reduces the risk of a premature death by 20-30%. Increased engagement in physical activity has likewise been seen to increase productivity levels and reduce absenteeism from both physical and mental health issues. With physical inactivity being estimated to cost Wales around £650 million per year, not only is keeping these facilities



open throughout the pandemic important for the health of constituents, but also in the best interests of the Welsh Government and the economy.

Furthermore, research has found that those with a heart condition and diabetes are at a high risk of experiencing more severe symptoms when contracting COVID-19. If increased physical activity reduced the percentage of the population that contracted these severe symptoms, then the impact of the virus on some individuals would potentially be lessened, as well as the strain on health services. Consequently, by keeping gyms and leisure facilities open within Wales, this has the potential to increase the health of constituents in general but also protect against serious COVID-19 symptoms as a result of prior health conditions in future. The Department of Health recommends that adults should aim to complete 30 minutes of exercise five times a week due to the health benefits this includes, and by keeping gym and leisure facilities open, this would mean that this goal is more achievable for many constituents.

Being part of a gym or leisure facility has been proven to incite valuable feelings of community, identity, and belonging, all of which are fundamental parts of functional society. By keeping gym and leisure facilities open, it would not only help to uphold these values, but provide a place in which constituents can safely exercise and enjoy the physical and mental benefits of this, whilst also maintaining the ability to enjoy a sense of belonging.

Throughout the period of lockdown in Wales, calls to Mental Health Helpline for Wales doubled, and whilst individuals were still able to exercise once a day, they were unable to use their local gym and leisure facilities. This implies a direct link between these facilities staying open and the mental health of constituents, and therefore closing gym and leisure facilities would only serve to exacerbate the deteriorating state of mental health experienced as a result of COVID-19.

Research supports the link between positive mental health and physical exercise. The Mental Health Foundation has found that "Physical activity has a huge potential to enhance our wellbeing", suggesting that it is successful in increasing self-esteem, reducing stress and anxiety, and being causal in mitigating the development of mental health problems. Physical activity has also been found as an effective alternative treatment to depression (when used alongside a combination of other treatments and medication), due to the endorphins it releases as well as the sense of routine and motivation. The multitude of benefits that result from physical exercise can consequently be used as arguments as to why gym and leisure facilities throughout Wales should remain open.

Within my own constituency of Delyn and the wider area of Flintshire, approximately 31% of adults (39,000 people) participate in physical activity 3 times a week, with visits to gym and leisure facilities being the second most common form of activity just behind walking (over 2 miles). Delyn has a vast array of fitness facilities that are used by a multitude of constituents, and the newly-opened Tribe Fitness in Flint particularly prides itself on its ability to build and maintain friendships, as well as strengthen the sense of community within the constituency, exemplifying the inherent value of gyms and leisure facilities to constituents.



The strict hygiene and social distancing measures that have been implemented throughout all gyms across Wales ensure that this friendship and sense of community from gym participation can still be achieved in a safe environment. Indeed, research has found that there are just 0.35 cases per 100,000 visits to gym and leisure facilities across the UK. Therefore, suggestions that gyms are hotspots for spreading COVID-19 and would place individuals at a high risk of contracting the virus are somewhat misguided, especially when considering the strict measures that have been implemented in all facilities following their reopening.

In addition to my earlier points, closure of gym and leisure facilities would place an even greater financial burden upon these businesses, on top of what they are already experiencing. For example, fifteen public pools and sports centers in Wales are already at risk of closing without the help of additional Welsh Government financial support. Community Leisure UK has stated that 44% of its trusts in Wales are on the cusp of closure, this is in addition to the fifteen centers that are already likely to permanently close.

Constituents need to be reassured and encouraged to exercise, and the Welsh Government should endorse them as being safe as opposed to closing them - especially as scientific research has found little transmission rates within these facilities. This would consequently increase constituent's mental and physical health, but at the same time protect the viability of these businesses in the long term.

Finally, it is worth noting that gyms and leisure facilities are able to remain open throughout the Medium and High tiers of the UK Government's new system and would still enable some activity to persist even in the Very High tier. I hope therefore that you take this into consideration when reviewing Wales' gym and leisure facilities.

As the virus continues to plague Wales, it is important that a sense of community is maintained and that we pull through this crisis together, and I believe that keeping open gyms and leisure facilities would significantly help towards achieving this unity.

I appreciate you taking the time to read and consider these various points.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Rob Roberts', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rob Roberts
Member of Parliament for Delyn

CC: Rt Hon the Lord Elis-Thomas PC MS, Deputy Minister for Culture Sport and Tourism