

16TH OCTOBER 2020

WHY THE BEST DAYS CAN STILL BE AHEAD FOR THE HEALTH & FITNESS SECTOR

Gyms are proving to be incredibly safe and keeping people happy and healthy

With so much doom and gloom dominating the public news agenda right now, it's important to look forward with some optimism.

It's been another turbulent couple of weeks for the UK and its devolved administrations with the introduction of the tiered local lockdown system in England, the 'fire-breaker' in Wales and level five measures in the Republic of Ireland.

This has been felt by the health and fitness sector, but it still feels like there are plenty of reasons to be positive. After fearing for the worst with closures of gyms in Merseyside, the decision that we could remain open in Lancashire and Greater Manchester encouraged an urgent rethink. While there is still work to do, our sector is finally being seen as safe and with the closure decision overturned in Liverpool and the closure of gyms removed from tier three Government legislation, we believe we can still play a safe and pivotal role in the fight against COVID-19.

We're safe, and people are starting to realise it

First of all, let's applaud how the health and fitness sector has excelled since reopening in keeping members and staff safe. Feedback across the sector is that people are returning to gyms in their droves and usage and joiners are growing every week. Most importantly, feedback from members has been very positive in how safe and secure they feel in their surroundings.

The UKActive statistic of 0.34 cases per 100,000 gym visits in the first two months post-opening was music to the ears of the industry, but not wholly unexpected. We believed as a sector that we had co-created a framework with members of SAGE and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, that gave us the potential to be one of the safest public spaces for customers. As we were emerging from the initial lockdown, the press opinion led people to believe we'd be one of the highest risk sectors but it's testament to the fantastic work of operators and support of members that this has been emphatically proved wrong.

While last week may feel like a significant knockback for some, particularly our clubs in Wales and the Republic of Ireland the tireless work of our sector, operators and UKActive to be COVID secure has been acknowledged by some of the devolved governments. As part of Nicola Sturgeon's additional safety measures launched earlier this month, gyms remain open for individual exercise and likewise in Northern Ireland, gyms remain trading and individual exercise is still permitted as part of its 'circuit breaker' lockdown.

These are huge achievements for our industry and represents an impressive turnaround. Emerging from the initial lockdown, we were one of the last sectors permitted to open our doors but have proven our ability to effectively socially distance and maintain the highest of cleanliness standards to prevent person-to-person transmission of the virus.

Health is part of the national conversation

People are more aware of the importance of their physical and mental health than ever and this is shown by research and pent-up demand for fitness memberships. According to UKActive data, nearly 70% of people now want to do more physical activity as a result of COVID-19 which is a really heartening statistic.

At Anytime Fitness, the performance of our clubs has been very encouraging since reopening and despite the uncertainty surrounding the current situation, are welcoming thousands of new members through their doors.

As the government agenda shifted towards a focus on physical activity, we are delighted to now be involved as a partner on Public Health England's Better Health campaign and provide accessible opportunities for people to take part in physical activity. This campaign is borne out of the nation being given a wake-up call in regards to their health and it's great to be welcoming people into our clubs who have seen now as the perfect opportunity to invest in their health.

The sector has been a long-term advocate of physical activity being prescribed and I'm sure I speak on everyone's behalf that we'll be ready and waiting to support people with their goals to become healthier and happier.

We can be a constant in people's lives- no matter the situation

We sympathise with businesses who will be required to close as part of the new three-tier lockdown system and hope that they are given the necessary Government and local authority support to come out of this the other side.

Like many industries, we continue to feel the effects of the original lockdown with the irrecoverable revenue from over four months of closure but we hope to be able to continue providing an essential service to the nation. In the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, exercise is the best possible medicine right now and in all three tiers of lockdown, we could and should be an industry that is always open and ready to serve our communities.

In stark contrast to the spring and summer lockdown, people will be less able to exercise outdoors given the change in weather conditions and loss of natural light in the evenings and gyms will be a safe and hospitable place for local communities. We can and need to play a huge part in keeping activity levels up and facilitating the positive knock-on effects for people's mental and physical health at a critical time when we're fighting the virus.

With people unable to go to pubs and restaurants in the worst-affected locations, people could see this as a great opportunity to join the gym and invest in their health. We are seeing an attitude shift when it comes to physical activity and are here to support and coach people whenever they're ready- in a safe, controlled and Covid-secure manner of course.

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At a time where it's easy to be despondent about everything that's going on, it seems more appropriate than ever to look at the positives. Things are going to be turbulent before we return to what we could deem as 'normal' but let's continue to keep our heads above water and do what we do best as a sector; make people happier and healthier.

Now is the time for a shift in not just the narrative, but also the legislation surrounding people's health and wellness and to work with the Government to have leisure facilities classified as an essential service- I sincerely hope that there are no further knee jerk reactions across the UK concerning our operation, and as we have shown before, we will continue to discuss, evidence and passionately campaign on this agenda.