Sport and physical activity sector local skills plan

Suffolk: 2026-2029

CREATED BY

Sport and Physical Activity Sector Local Skills Accountability Board – Suffolk

CIMSPA®

Active Suffolk





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Credits:

This plan was developed in collaboration with Active Suffolk.

Introduction and context

The sport and physical activity sector continues to play a vital role in supporting healthier, more connected and resilient communities.

Since the development of the trailblazing Suffolk Sport and Physical Activity Sector Skills Strategy 2021–2026, informed by the East Region Skills Pilot in 2021, the landscape in which the sector operates has evolved significantly. Changes in workforce expectations, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, growing demand for inclusive and accessible provision, and an increased focus on health inequalities have all shaped the need for a refreshed and forward-looking approach to skills development.

This refreshed skills plan identifies the key skills improvements, workforce challenges and priorities for local sport and physical activity and sets out recommendations and actions to shape our work and impact while still aligning with other national work in the sector.

With an ageing population, rising inequalities and increasing physical and mental health challenges, the role of sport and physical activity has never been more important in supporting a fairer, healthier and more prosperous society.

Sport and physical activity provision must respond to real needs in a changing environment, with a workforce equipped with the skills, knowledge and behaviours to meet challenges and support local communities.

This revised local skills plan reaffirms a shared commitment to a sustainable skills system that supports recruitment, retention and progression across the sector. It places a stronger emphasis on inclusion and accessibility, and sets out a collaborative vision to strengthen skills, enhance partnerships and support a resilient sector.



Suffolk – geographical area

This local skills plan encompasses all five districts and boroughs of Suffolk: Babergh, East Suffolk, Ipswich, Mid Suffolk and West Suffolk.



CIMSPA and local skills

The right training, delivered in the right place, at the right time.

Our collaborative local skills project is bringing together employers, education providers and employability-focused organisations to effectively and efficiently match supply and demand.

CIMSPA – the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity – is the chartered professional body for the sport and physical activity sector workforce.

In 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published "Get Active: A strategy for the future of sport and physical activity". This strategy explicitly backs CIMSPA's rollout of local-based skills and training: "We will support CIMSPA in the development of local skills improvement plans with full national coverage."

In line with its "Uniting the Movement" strategy, Sport England has commissioned CIMSPA to help accelerate local-focused skills improvements within the sport and physical activity workforce.

CIMSPA has already deployed a complete delivery team of multiple workforce development managers working at a local level across England, Wales and Scotland.

Funding and support

Our local skills work to engage with employability-focused organisations and build a representative sport and physical activity sector workforce is funded and supported by Sport England and the National Lottery.

Get involved

To learn more about this local skills plan or the work of your local skills accountability board please contact CIMSPA who will link you with their workforce development manager for Suffolk.

partners@cimspa.co.uk

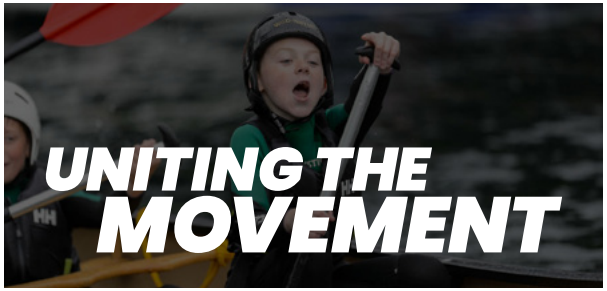
LOCAL SKILLS ACCOUNTABILITY BOARD WEBSITE PAGE

National context



DCMS strategy context

In August 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published "Get Active: A strategy for the future of sport and physical activity". This strategy explicitly backs CIMSPA's rollout of local-based skills and training: "We will support CIMSPA in the development of Local Skills Improvement Plans with full national coverage."



Sport England strategy context

In 2021, Sport England launched Uniting the Movement, a 10-year strategy outlining the importance of the workforce in driving change to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity.

Uniting the Movement strategic priorities include:

- Unleashing the power of diversity
- Ensuring people have access to help from those who relate to their experiences
- Training and qualifications fit for the future
- Better career choices
- Organisations contributing more to the social fabric of their communities

With this, the sector's workforce must be representative of the community it serves, creating sustainable careers, placing local employer and individual need at the heart of training and development. There is a collective responsibility to ensure the sport and physical activity sector is a valued and accessible career choice with progression for individuals.

Local Skills Improvement Plan context

Introduced via the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) are designed to ensure that education, funding and workforce development match the hiring and operational needs of local employers. They bring together employers, education providers and other stakeholders to directly shape where local economic efforts are targeted.

Initially, focus primarily lay on sectors such as healthcare and construction. However, since the roll-out of the initial 38 plans in 2023, the sport and physical activity sector has supported their implementation through sector-specific local skills plans. With the launch of the new cycle of LSIPs in 2026, the sector is being increasingly prioritised as a catalyst for health and wellbeing and thereby economic activity across many localities.

Local context

Norfolk and Suffolk Local Skills Improvement Plan

The Norfolk and Suffolk Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is led jointly by the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce and Norfolk Chambers of Commerce. It sets out the key priorities needed to make technical education and skills provision more responsive to the changing needs of employers and the local economy.

The plan does not list sport and physical activity as one of its four headline priority growth sectors, however, there are still important connections between the LSIP and this plan. LSIP actions and funding can influence the sport and physical activity workforce and as such connect to this plan.

Key links between the LSIP and this plan:

- The LSIP emphasises the importance of transferable soft skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving and digital competence. These are central to roles in sport and physical activity, from coaching to facility management.
- LSIP funding for training providers such as colleges and adult learning centres can be leveraged to create or expand sector qualifications.
- While the LSIP focuses on economic growth, health and wellbeing sectors (including sport and physical activity) are part of the local labour market needs.
- LSIP events and employer engagement activities can be used by sport and physical activity organisations (for example, local football clubs, leisure trusts and Active Partnerships) to connect and create networks. Even though sport and physical activity is not a named LSIP priority sector, the plan's skills priorities, training investments and employer engagement mechanisms can directly benefit the workforce in this field.

NORFOLK AND SUFFOLK LSIP



Themes, recommendations, partners and stakeholders

Themes

This plan has four themes.

1 Recruitment

Ensuring supply meets demand by attracting the best talent to work in the sport and physical activity sector.

2 Training and professional development

Enhancing the training offered locally and ensuring that the funding which supports it can:

- Meet the demand and needs of employers
- Produce work-ready people
- Add complementary skills to enable people to achieve their career or business goals

3 Support

Ensuring the right support is available for the local sport and activity workforce and their employers to enable the outcomes of this skills plan to be achieved.

4 Retention

Working to retain talent within the sector and upskilling our workforce with the skills required to flourish.

Recommendations

This plan has three headline recommendations:

1 Strengthen career entry pathways

Improve awareness of career and training opportunities and shape education provision around local workforce needs to drive employability within the sport and physical activity sector.

2 Improve workforce retention

Support and train the workforce to enable career progression and workforce retention.

3 Align with local health priorities

Develop and empower a sport and physical activity workforce able to confidently work with those living with long-term health conditions.

Partners and stakeholders

CIMSPA will work collaboratively with a range of partners and stakeholders to deliver on the actions that underpin this plan's recommendations.

These include:

Education and training providers

Those delivering accredited training – both sector/occupation-specific training and training around basic skills, knowledge and behaviours – for example, further education colleges and higher education institutes.

Skills and sector partners

Those with knowledge and understanding of the sport and physical activity sector, with expertise to support both employers and training providers, Active Suffolk, national governing bodies of sport and other system partners.

Employers and deployers

For example, leisure providers, coaching companies and gym owners.

Recommendations and actions

RECOMMENDATION 1

Strengthen career entry pathways: Improve awareness of career and training opportunities and shape education provision around local workforce needs to drive employability within the sport and physical activity sector.

Theme(s)	No.	2026–2029 actions	What does success look like?	How will it be measured?*
RECRUIT	1a	Improve awareness of career opportunities in sport and physical activity among career explorers, career changers and people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).	▸ Increased awareness of sector career resources such as the CIMSPA Careers Hub ▸ More people from Suffolk access the CIMSPA Careers Hub ▸ Increased interest in sport and physical activity roles ▸ Local people have a clear understanding of skills needed to enter the workforce ▸ Local people develop and evidence key skills needed in our sector ▸ More local people enter the sector workforce	▸ CIMSPA Careers Hub data ▸ Workforce Diagnostic Tool data ▸ CIMSPA professional status data ▸ Local documentation and reporting
RECRUIT SUPPORT TRAIN	1b	Use collaboration between employers, education providers and CIMSPA to develop training and qualifications aligned with employer needs.	▸ Strong collaboration is established between education providers, employers and CIMSPA ▸ Employers and education providers work together to create skills portfolios that identify key skills required by local employers ▸ Education providers and learners clearly understand the technical and soft skills required for workforce entry ▸ Curricula reflect the current skills, knowledge and competencies required by local employers ▸ Learners develop the practical skills and knowledge needed for employment or progression within sector roles ▸ Increased job applications from suitable candidates ▸ Employers report fewer skills gaps	▸ Education provider course destination data ▸ Employer recruitment data ▸ Workforce Development Tool data ▸ Local documentation and reporting

*See glossary below for more information on specific terms.

Recommendations and actions

RECOMMENDATION 1 continued

Strengthen career entry pathways: Improve awareness of career and training opportunities and shape education provision around local workforce needs to drive employability within the sport and physical activity sector.

Theme(s)	No.	2026–2029 actions	What does success look like?	How will it be measured?*
RECRUIT SUPPORT TRAIN	1c	Build partnerships between sector stakeholders and employment and skills services to develop pathways into sport and physical activity careers.	▸ Increased awareness of local training already available to support local people who are NEET and career changers into the workforce ▸ Employability services are able to access suitable training for local residents interested in working in sport and physical activity ▸ More economically inactive people pursue sport and physical activity career pathways as a vehicle into employment ▸ Employers are connected with employment and skills services to support recruitment processes ▸ Employers report reduced recruitment challenges ▸ The workforce is more reflective of the local community	▸ Employer recruitment data ▸ Workforce Development Tool data ▸ Local documentation and reporting

To achieve recommendation 1, we must bring together local education providers and employers to identify key industry skills, provide more exposure to industry settings and highlight career pathways.

*See glossary below for more information on specific terms.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Improve workforce retention: Support and train the workforce to enable career progression and workforce retention.

Theme(s)	No.	2026–2029 actions	What does success look like?	How will it be measured?*
SUPPORT RETAIN	2a	Understand workforce retention by analysing current retention, targets and practice.	▸ Workforce Development Tool data is used to analyse retention across the region ▸ Employers have a better understanding of their retention rates and barriers to retention ▸ Current retention practice is analysed and understood ▸ Employers start to understand how to improve retention	▸ Qualitative data
TRAIN RETAIN	2b	Increase employer awareness and adoption of CIMSPA professional status as a means of providing clear career progression pathways.	▸ Increased awareness of and engagement with CIMSPA professional status by employers to identify skills needed within different roles ▸ Increased awareness of resources to support career progression within the sector such as the CIMSPA Careers Hub ▸ Employers provide workforce with upskilling opportunities, enabling further career progression ▸ Sport and physical activity professionals progress in their careers	▸ Workforce Development Tool data (improved retention rate) ▸ CIMSPA professional status data ▸ CIMSPA Careers Hub data ▸ Qualitative data
SUPPORT TRAIN RETAIN	2c	Use a range of formal and informal training to develop skills for progression within the workforce.	▸ Current local training opportunities are identified and mapped ▸ Diverse training opportunities are available to the workforce ▸ Employers encourage and facilitate staff upskilling ▸ Local training is inclusive and accessible to all ▸ A better skilled local workforce	▸ Training providers reporting increased uptake in training offer ▸ Number of training opportunities available ▸ CIMSPA professional status data

To achieve recommendation 2, we must build the capacity of local employers and strengthen collaboration across the sector to co-design workforce solutions that meet employer needs and create inclusive career opportunities.

*See glossary below for more information on specific terms.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Align with local health priorities: Develop and empower a sport and physical activity workforce able to confidently work with those living with long-term health conditions.

Theme(s)	No.	2026–2029 actions	What does success look like?	How will it be measured?*
TRAIN RETAIN	3a	Promote the breadth of career opportunities in sport and physical activity with a focus on roles connected to healthcare.	▸ Sector professionals understand how the professional standards and CIMSPA professional status support their career progression and specialisation in healthcare support roles ▸ Raised profile of the role sport and physical activity can play in improving health and enhancing wellbeing ▸ Increased recruitment into healthcare-aligned roles	▸ Number of CIMSPA professional status holders with healthcare-related training in Suffolk ▸ Workforce Development Tool data
SUPPORT	3b	Build strong partnerships between the sport and physical activity sector and local health organisations to embed physical activity within preventative care.	▸ Strong partnerships established between health and sport and physical activity organisations ▸ Healthcare providers understand and value the role of physical activity in positive patient outcomes ▸ Increased use of sport and physical activity professionals in preventative healthcare treatment	▸ Number of exercise referral patients ▸ Qualitative data ▸ Local documentation and reporting

*See glossary below for more information on specific terms.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Align with local health priorities: Develop and empower a sport and physical activity workforce able to confidently work with those living with long-term health conditions.

Theme(s)	No.	2026–2029 actions	What does success look like?	How will it be measured?*
SUPPORT TRAIN	3c	Connect education providers with healthcare sector stakeholders to align training with health and care programme delivery requirements.	▸ Training opportunities focused on managing long-term conditions through physical activity interventions are readily available ▸ More sport and physical activity professionals with specialised healthcare qualifications ▸ Increased workforce capacity for exercise referral programmes ▸ Healthcare providers and sport and physical activity participants value the increased specialist knowledge and service delivery of sport and physical activity practitioners ▸ Ongoing expansion of training offerings to address evolving healthcare needs ▸ Reduced need for further sport and physical activity professionals with healthcare specialisms	▸ Workforce Development Tool data ▸ Number of health-specialised training opportunities ▸ Qualitative data ▸ Local documentation and reporting

To achieve recommendation 3, we will embed professional standards across the Suffolk workforce and strengthen collaboration with public health and wellbeing services. This will ensure that the sector is trusted, consistent and equipped to support local priorities such as managing inactivity and long-term health conditions.

*See glossary below for more information on specific terms.

Data and insight that have informed this work

Physical inactivity

- Almost a quarter (24.7%) of Suffolk adults are physically inactive.[1]
- 32.7% of Suffolk children (approximately 29,800) are active for fewer than 30 minutes per day. This is a 5.3% increase on the previous year.[1]
- 42.5% of Suffolk children and young people aged 5–16 meet recommended physical activity levels, achieving an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity per day.[1]

Health

- 17.5% of people in Suffolk report a long-term musculoskeletal (MSK) condition.[2]
- 13.2% of people in Suffolk report at least two long-term conditions, with at least one being musculoskeletal.[2]
- 13.5% of people in England report a long-term mental health condition.[2]
- 45.9% of Suffolk adults with a disability or long-term health condition are physically active.[1]
- 38.2% of Suffolk residents aged 75 and over are physically inactive, making activity interventions increasingly important for healthy ageing.[1]

Employment

- Only 4.8% of adults aged 18–64 receiving long-term support for a learning disability were in paid employment in 2023. This highlights one of the largest barriers to inclusive employment.[2]
- In 2023, 65.3% of people across England aged 16–64 with a physical or mental long-term health condition were in employment.[2]
- 66.1% of people aged 16–64 in Mid Suffolk were employed in the year ending December 2023. This is significantly lower than the East of England average of 77.5%.[4]
- 3.7% of economically active residents in Suffolk aged 16+ were unemployed in March 2026.[3]
- 13,510 Suffolk residents were claiming out-of-work-related benefits in June 2026.[4]

1. ACTIVE LIVES ONLINE, SPORT ENGLAND, 2025

2. FINGERTIPS PUBLIC HEALTH PROFILES, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE, 2025

3. EMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC INACTIVITY IN MID SUFFOLK, LOCAL, OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2024

4. NOMIS LABOUR MARKET PROFILE – SUFFOLK, OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2026

The scope of the sport and physical activity sector

Sector and industries definitions

The sport and physical activity sector:

"Everyone working in the sport and physical activity workforce in the industries and occupations detailed below and overleaf."

Sector industries

Industry definitions from CIMSPA for the purpose of this strategy are shown in the table (right).

Paid/voluntary workforce

This sport and physical activity sector local skills plan aims to be broad enough in its outcomes to not need to be separated by employment/deployment status.

Industry	Definition
Exercise and fitness	Services, activities and venues that predominantly improve participant physical fitness.
Community sport	Sport/skill-based services, activities and venues that increase participation and develop skill, sometimes targeting under-represented groups and inequalities.
Leisure operations	Services, activities and venues that predominantly improve participation in physical activity.
Health and wellbeing	Holistic services and activities that promote improvements across all aspects of health, sometimes involving health care and other non-sector professionals.
Adventure sport	Activities, services and venues both indoor and outdoor improving participation in sport perceived as having a high level of risk.
Performance sport	Competitive sport and activities including those in which athletes receive payment for their performance; professional, semi-professional and grass roots sport.

Occupations

Introduction

"Occupations" are a standardised set of job roles that cover the whole of the sport and physical activity sector. For example, what some operators might call a "leisure attendant" is considered to be part of the "recreation assistant" occupation.

Definitions

- Frontline – occupations in sport and physical activity directly servicing the needs of the participant.
- Support chain – occupations in sport and physical activity servicing the needs of the front line and/or the facilities.
- Extended workforce – enablers and influencers of sport and physical activity who are not part of the sector workforce.

Frontline occupations

Sector workforce Occupations aligned with CIMSPA professional standards	Gym Instructor, core group exercise instructor, coach, coaching assistant, personal trainer, strength and conditioning trainer, pilates based matwork instructor, yoga instructor, aspiring manager, entry manager, health navigator, swimming teacher, lifeguard, recreation assistant, assistant swimming teacher, sports therapist*, nutritionist*, sport nutritionist*, physiotherapist*. *Occupations supported directly by other professional bodies
Broader workforce	Receptionist, bar staff, kitchen and catering assistant, waiting staff, cleaning assistant, domestic assistant, sales and retail assistant, chef.

Support chain occupations

Sector workforce Occupations aligned with CIMSPA professional standards	Entry manager, general manager, senior manager, tutor, assessor, coach developer, health navigator, pool plant operative.
Broader workforce	Sport development officer, researcher, teacher, administrative occupations, finance occupations, health and safety, quality manager, environmental manager, auditor, sports media and reporters, general assistant, maintenance operative (examples).

Extended workforce

Enablers Enablers of sport and physical activity who don't necessarily hold a CIMSPA-recognised professional qualification	Primary school teachers, teaching assistants, PE teachers, childcare workers, carers, sport event staff/volunteers, activity group leaders (e.g. scouts, guides etc), officiating.
Influencers Influencers of sport and physical activity who don't necessarily hold a sector-specific professional qualification	Parents, sport role models, sport and fitness models, sport and fitness social media influencers.

Glossary

Business skills diagnostic

CIMSPA has developed and launched a business diagnostic process through its workforce development team.

Sole traders and micro-enterprises of fewer than 10 employees make up 89% percent of the businesses in our sector, including over 73,000 freelancers and sole traders.

The diagnostic focuses in particular on this business type – building an understanding of their business needs and exploring how we can position our product offer and partner support to meet these.

In 2026, the Workforce Development Tool replaced the local workforce skills diagnostic and business diagnostic surveys.

CIMSPA Data Lens

The CIMSPA Data Lens is a real-time intelligence dashboard for the UK's sport and physical activity sector.

The Data Lens system uses web-scraping APIs to open access data and machine learning, all segmented through real-world definitions specific to the sport and physical activity sector.

It can be interrogated specifically in niche areas such as exercise and fitness or community sport, or even specific geographies at a county or town level.

DATA LENS

East Region Skills Pilot

The East Region Skills Pilot, launched in 2020, was a pioneering initiative that brought together Active Partnerships across the East of England, CIMSPA and regional stakeholders. Working together on this pilot scheme, they mapped workforce supply and demand, tackle post-pandemic labour shortages and deliver targeted training and qualifications. The pilot laid the foundations for the region's first local skills strategies.

Local documentation and reporting

Throughout the lifespan of this local skills plan, CIMSPA and the local skills accountability board will look to incorporate any new sector-specific data created by local stakeholders that helps us understand the impact of our actions.

For example – employability and skills reports, survey results and impact reports.

Local skills accountability board (LSAB)

A group of local education and training, skills/employability, health and employer stakeholders across a region and within the sport and physical activity sector.

LSABs are co-ordinated and managed by CIMSPA, enabled by Sport England and National Lottery funding.

Local skills improvement plan

Local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) provide an agreed set of actionable priorities that stakeholders in a local area can get behind to drive change.

LSIPs:

- place employers at the heart of local skills systems
- facilitate direct and dynamic working arrangements between employers, providers and local stakeholders
- help learners gain the skills they need to get good jobs and increase their prospects.

Each LSIP has a designated Employer Representative Body (ERB), appointed by the Department for Education.

This document is **NOT** an LSIP.

Local workforce skills diagnostic data

CIMSPA has a team of local workforce development managers working across England, Scotland and Wales.

These workforce development managers are engaged in collecting workforce skills intelligence directly from employers in their local area, through a detailed and standardised workforce skills diagnostic survey.

This data can then be segmented at the level of the local skills accountability board for use in better understanding local workforce needs and in monitoring the success of workforce improvement initiatives.

In 2026, the Workforce Development Tool replaced the local workforce skills diagnostic and business diagnostic surveys.

Professional status

Professional status is a defined understanding of the level at which an individual can apply their skills, knowledge and experience to working in the sport and physical activity sector. Professional statuses are issued by CIMSPA as a chartered professional body and recognised regulator.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data is non-numeric, descriptive information that gathers experiences and perceptions. It includes case studies, feedback via surveys and forms, and interviews.

Sport and physical activity sector local skills plan

This document is a sport and physical activity sector local skills plan. It is a local skills plan specific to the sport and physical activity sector in a specific region.

The plan has been created by the local skills accountability board (see above), coordinated and managed by CIMSPA.

Workforce Development Tool

The Workforce Development Tool, based on the sector's employer-led professional standards which are managed by CIMSPA, is an employer-focused online suite of surveys.

The tool has been developed by CIMSPA to capture workforce insights from organisations operating in the sport and physical activity sector. It explores and supports recruitment, retention, training and workforce planning by gathering data on current workforce structure; skills gaps; recruitment practices; training and development needs; diversity and inclusion; and volunteer engagement.

Local workforce development managers use the Workforce Development Tool to collect data from sport and physical employers across each region of the UK.

This data will help inform each region's local skills plan, identifying current skills within the workforce and gaps that need to be filled based on demand in the area.



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