

18 OCTOBER, 2011

A Vision for the Future of Leisure Centres – Update

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr A Harris – Leisure and Culture

Executive Summary:

The report provides an update on the 18 recommendations made by the Scrutiny Working Group into Leisure Centres in 2010. The majority of the recommendations have been evolved into proposals in a wider Sport and Leisure Review proposing an explicit focus on health and wellbeing. The Sport and Leisure Review is currently being tested using Working Smarter principles before being presented to Cabinet.

Reason for scrutiny:

This is an update on a previous Scrutiny Working Group report.

Recommendations:

That, subject to any comments may wish to make, the report be noted.

Background papers:

None

Resource and legal considerations:

None

Citizen impact:

It is considered that the proposals outlined in the Sport and Leisure Review will have a significant positive impact on improving the health and wellbeing of Walsall citizens.

Environmental impact:

None

Performance management:

The Sport and Leisure Review proposes a refocusing of the performance management of the Sport and Leisure Service with a far greater emphasis on evidencing positive health outcomes.

Equality Implications:

An equality impact assessment will be completed as part of the Sport and Leisure Review.

Consultation:

NHS Walsall
Walsall College
Wolverhampton University
School Sports Partnerships
Walsall Children's Services

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1. Report

Progress on the recommendations made in the Scrutiny Working Group report is as follows:

1. **The current number of visits to Council Leisure Centres must be safeguarded as the minimum standard and provision must not be allowed to drop below this.**

The retention of the four leisure centres is a specific headline proposal in the Sport and Leisure Review. It reflects strong evidence indicating that we currently have the right number of the right type of facilities, in the right locations.

2. **The aspirational goal should be to replace the four existing leisure centres with new leisure centres strategically located in the borough.**

Notwithstanding the above, the Sport and Leisure Review also acknowledges the limitations of the existing facilities in terms of age and quality, and retains the aspiration to make capital replacements as and when possible. However it is worth noting that the capital funding environment for sport and leisure remains extremely challenging and the prospect of securing substantial external funding to support leisure centre replacement is very limited.

3. **In lieu of major capital investment in new sport & leisure centres, the existing four leisure centres should be refurbished to extend their life and utility.**

The Sport and Leisure Review highlights the improvements that have been made to existing facilities with the limited funding available – recent examples being the new Gala Baths Dance Studio and the Brine Pool changing room refurbishment. The report highlights the opportunity to secure commercial investment in the leisure centres once their continued operation can be agreed in the medium term (5 years).

4. **A study into leisure management options and specifically the feasibility of externalisation as a trust should be commissioned.**

A study was commissioned which identifies that the most advantageous management option would be a Walsall-based charitable Company Limited by Guarantee – a “Leisure Trust”. Though this option appears to be the most favourable in terms of management and finance, it is essential to complete the Working Smarter segment of the review before solutions of this nature can be fully appraised.

5. To produce individual medium-term business and asset management plans for each of the four existing leisure centres.

Work to date has focused on the future of the service in terms of strategic positioning – specifically the focus on health and wellbeing. Business planning at an individual service unit level has been deferred until after the review has been completed, to ensure these plans can be drafted, informed by and supporting the wider service priorities.

6. To engage key strategic partners in the planning for both the continued operation of the existing leisure centres and also the provision of future facilities.

The Sport and Leisure Review has been developed in partnership with Walsall Community Activity Network, including consultation with key strategic partners including NHS Walsall, Wolverhampton University and Walsall College.

7. A survey of local school sport and swimming pools take place to establish the range of facilities on offer to local communities and the potential to extend this. The survey should also consider access arrangements for all Members of the community including the disabled.

This work has not yet taken place.

The changing education environment including the cancellation of BSF and the greater independence of schools in *The Importance of Teaching: Schools White Paper* (2010) has made involving school sports provision within facility planning problematic. For example Academy status has had significant impact on the provision of school sports facilities nationally – the de-ring-fencing of funding has lead many schools to reconsider their sports facility offer. Until the implications for Walsall schools become clearer, the scope for planning for school sports facilities may be limited

8. To designate six school swimming pools as “core” facilities to be retained alongside the remaining leisure centres and consider the remaining school pools “surplus”.

Although the principle of this remains sound, the implementation has been deferred for the reasons outlined in number 7 above.

9. To only support capital repairs on the school pools designated as “core” facilities and to no longer fund capital repairs on “surplus” school pools.

This work is deferred for the reasons outlined above.

- 10. To change the allocation of devolved formula funding to schools to no longer compensate for the running costs of “surplus” pools and re-allocate this funding to improve quality and access to the “core” school pools.**

This work is also deferred for the reasons outlined above.

- 11. If school pool closures do occur, schools will be supported to access alternate provision.**

Any strategic work to encourage the rationalisation of school swimming pools is on hold as outlined above – although it is work reiterating that the Council cannot compel the closure or retention of a school pools, it is ultimately a matter for the individual schools. However should any pool closures occur, officers will assist schools to access alternate provision; as was the case when Willenhall Leisure Centre closed and all school swimming was successfully relocated.

- 12. Wider issues associated with the management and operation of swimming pools be discussed with headteachers and governing bodies.**

Again this work has been deferred pending clarification of the issues explained under recommendation 7.

- 13. Leisure centres be considered as locations to offer customer service activities on behalf of the Council.**

There is certainly the opportunity for leisure centres to be used to offer customer service activities. Given the resource limitations of the Customer Contact team this function may be limited to making information available and signposting to other services.

- 14. Leisure Centres be considered as locations to host other Council services including, but not exclusive to, libraries.**

This is actively being pursued – there have been initial discussions regarding the re-provision of Walsall Wood Library within Oak Park Leisure Centre.

- 15. Any capital receipts received from the future sale of leisure centre assets should be ring fenced for reinvestment in the service.**

Although this is not normal practice with capital receipts, there is a precedent for this with the previous Library Modernisation Programme. In the light of recommendations one and three, no such disposal of leisure centre assets should take place, except as part of a project that includes provision for their replacement / improvement.

16. Leisure Centres be re-branded 'Health and Wellbeing Centres'.

The explicit re-branding as Health and Wellbeing Centres was not well received as part of the Sport and Leisure Review consultation – it was felt that it may confuse users and risk misrepresenting what the facilities actually contain. However the Sport and Leisure Review is built around the principle that health and wellbeing will become the explicit function of the service.

17. Partnerships with the health service be actively pursued.

The already strong link with NHS Walsall has evolved significantly in the last 12 months. Under their Transforming Community Services agenda initial discussions were had to integrate the NHS Lifestyle Services with Sport and Leisure Services, though this is now on hiatus pending more recent NHS reorganisation. The transfer of public health functions to local authorities under the *Healthy Lives Healthy People White Paper (2010)* will further strengthen this link, with Sport and Leisure represented at the transition steering group.

On a practical level Sport and Leisure Services continue to work with NHS colleagues on a variety of initiatives including free swimming, healthy eating, falls prevention and children's weight management.

18. Subsidised parking be provided for Council leisure centre users.

This option has been looked into, however a viable solution has yet to be identified. The most practical option is for the service to purchase a number of parking permits and issue them to leisure centre users – however this option has a range of limitations, including how to ensure the permits are not abused – i.e. used only for leisure centre visits and not for general visits to the town centre.

Having researched this option elsewhere it is usually reliant on there being either a dedicated leisure centre car park or for parking machines to issue two-part tickets, allowing users to display half and bring in the other part to receive a full or partial refund when paying for their leisure centre visit.

Having looked at car parking for leisure in other authorities, several are taking a different approach and actually introducing car parking charges where they were previously free.