



West Berkshire Council Liberal Democrat Group Response to Leisure strategy 2021-31

Introduction

An ambitious and wide-reaching leisure provision will play a significant part in the COVID recovery phase and life thereafter, so we welcome the presentation of this draft strategy and the opportunity to provide feedback. It does include some good aspects to this strategy, and unusually for a strategy from the current West Berks Council administration, even includes a number of specific targets and delivery focuses, so it is gratifying that our frequent criticism of recent strategy documents has finally been acted upon.

Starting from a very low point and many years of significant under-funding

As evidenced by indicators such as the findings of the 2019 Playing Pitch Strategy [1] and expenditure on leisure by West Berks Council (see figure 1), the residents of West Berkshire have suffered from poor provision across the district and gross under-funding of the sector for a number of years.

Period	Budget - Net current expenditure - Recreation and sport (RA)			
	GBP (000)			
	West Berkshire	Minimum for All English single tier local authorities	Mean for All English single tier local authorities	Maximum for All English single tier local authorities
2015/16 ↓↑	442 ↓↑	-2,200 ↓↑	2,560 ↓↑	34,004 ↓↑
2016/17	463	-2,485	2,235	32,742
2017/18	559	-2,945	1,942	21,422
2018/19	298	-3,497	1,673	20,776
2019/20	310	-4,168	1,640	22,008
2020/21	342	-3,402	1,807	22,476

Figure 1. Net current expenditure on recreation and sport by West Berks Council. Source LGA Inform.

Net expenditure by West Berks on recreation and sport per annum £342,000 in 2020/21, and putting this into perspective, this is significantly below average for single tier authorities and has been consistently significantly lower than the average for single tier authorities for the last 6 years.

Other relevant benchmarks from the LGA Headline Report for West Berkshire illustrating the starting point for this strategy:-

- West Berks has a below average percentage of adults aged 16+ who are active (60.9%)
- West Berks has seen significantly below average expenditure on public health per 1000 population (38.52 £000 per 1000 population)

As a result, leisure provision is starting from a very low base.



Key observations

1. **The balance between formal and informal leisure activities in the strategy is not equal.** With a few exceptions (see below), we feel the level of detail given to formal leisure provision is appropriate, However, the same level of consideration and detail has not been given to informal leisure activities. With informal leisure being easier, cheaper and more commonly undertaken, this imbalance is a serious omission.
2. **The 10 year life expectancy gap in West Berkshire is not as a result of the mix of rural and urban settlements page 6,** but as a result of long term inequalities and poverty in areas of deprivation in Greenham, Thatcham North and Calcot. This was identified in the Council Strategy 2019-2023 [2], but still persists to the shame of the administration.
3. **The deficit in artificial grass pitches for football (page 6) in the district is identified as a key challenge.** Despite this, the strategy does not give any indication of how this will be addressed, which is another serious omission.
4. **The feasibility into possible rationalisation of current facilities (page 18)** does not seem to sit with the aim of extending participation and Strategic Objective 2, to deliver accessible locations and modern facilities.
5. **No consideration given to increasing public rights of way.** With one of the key targets in 6.1 to *develop a comprehensive plan for all council operated public open spaces, footpaths and common designed to maximise accessibility and physical activity*, an obvious way to do this in a highly cost-effective way is through increasing public rights of way across West Berkshire. The informal leisure opportunities afforded by accessing open space bring significant physical and mental health benefits. It is also an area of potential partnership with parish councils, providing initiatives and projects for education and improved signage, and has already been identified in the Council's Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2010-2020 [3].
6. **Improved balance required for bridleways.** To improve access to open spaces for the majority of users, a better balance must be achieved to satisfy the needs of walkers, horse-riders and others. In places around the district, bridleways are dominated by four wheel drive vehicles to the detriment of other types of user. To give this the priority it deserves, it should be included in the final strategy.
7. **The strategy mentions the Northcroft Leisure Centre, and facilities in Thatcham and Hungerford, but does not mention the Cotswold Sports Centre, the Downloads Sports Centre, the Willink Leisure Centre or the Lambourn Centre.** It is essential residents in the west and east of West Berkshire are served as fully by this strategy



as residents in Newbury and Thatcham.

- 8. The Hub Partners (page 15) lists three neighbouring local authorities, but does not include Basingstoke and Deane.** The Hurst Leisure Centre in Baughurst and the Tadley Health and Fitness Centre in Tadley, are very close to residents in the south of West Berkshire, so Basingstoke and Deane should be a key hub partner.

References

1. West Berkshire Council Playing Pitch Strategy, Strategy Document, Version 2.1, November 2019.
<http://decisionmaking.westberks.gov.uk/documents/s81944/14b.%20West%20Berk%20PPS.pdf>
2. Council Strategy 2019-2023, West Berkshire Council.
<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=47200&p=0>
3. Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2010-2020, West Berkshire Council.
<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=36432&p=0>