

Winchester Fit for the Future

Let's build Winchester's Olympic legacy!



Councillors and relevant Officers
Winchester City Council

2nd December 2013

Dear Colleagues

WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL 'LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT': CONSULTATION NOVEMBER 2013

I welcome the fact that Winchester City Council is now turning its attention to the need to improve sport and leisure provision across the city and district.

I further welcome the consideration of Bar End as a location for new sport and leisure facilities.

It is clearly important to consult widely on this issue, and particularly important to engage local people with expertise in sport and leisure. I hope, therefore, that this initial consultation exercise will start a period of more comprehensive dialogue with community sports clubs and other local experts.

Winchester Fit for the Future is, as you know, working to improve sports provision in the Winchester area. For more than two years, we have engaged in detailed and diligent research and analysis, examining local need and potential as well as national and international best practice. Our outline proposals, which Councillors and Officers have seen, reflected this voluntary effort and can be found on our website www.fit4thefuture.org alongside other documents we have developed.

The feedback below has been informed by the same research and analysis, and is intended to be a constructive comment on the leisure centre options recently put forward by Winchester City Council (WCC). My comments cover two aspects: the proposed facility mix, and the proposed location.

I believe we now have an opportunity to develop sports and leisure facilities that can serve our City and broader District for many decades to come. This opportunity may be unique, given the coincidence of factors that make strategic investment possible, namely:

- Our public leisure facility, River Park LC, is in a poor state of repair and needs to be replaced;
- Our local university also wishes to expand its facilities, in order to enhance sports and recreational provision for its students;
- Our community sports clubs are facing unprecedented demand for their provision and many face facilities constraints;
- It is clear, therefore, that demand for sports and leisure facilities is high;
- Construction costs are relatively low;
- Borrowing costs are relatively low;
- Post-Olympic/Paralympic grants are still available, and interest in sport following London 2012 remains high;
- Our local community continues to demonstrate a passion for sport and to engage energetically in the debate about where and how to develop new facilities – specifically, the public petition for a new community sport and leisure centre has attracted almost 3500 signatures.

I hope that WCC will now work closely with the university, community sports clubs and other local institutions, drawing on the expertise and energy that they embody to deliver a strategic and exciting outcome for the Winchester area.

1. Proposed Facility Mix

Key feedback point: The facilities proposed are inadequate. They would not meet the existing needs of the local area, let alone future requirements. As such, they would make a very limited contribution to efforts to increase participation in sport or develop local sporting talent.

Winchester's existing community sports facilities do not meet the area's needs. Recent research – including studies conducted to inform the Winchester District Local Plan (Parts 1 and 2), the 'Leisure Centre Provision Options Appraisal and Feasibility Study' by Continuum Sport and Leisure, and Winchester Fit for the Future's own research and analysis – identifies deficits in provision in several areas. Existing demand outstrips the supply of aquatic and indoor court facilities, in particular. The Amateur Swimming Association, for example, has identified a deficit across the district of 'community accessible water space' totalling 708.25m², even with River Park Leisure Centre in operation. Several types of facility – most obviously those for gymnastics – are missing altogether from the Winchester area.

None of the four options put forward by WCC would correct the existing deficit. Indeed, the new facilities proposed offer very little beyond those in the existing

River Park Leisure Centre, which was constructed in 1974 and added to during the 1980s:

River Park Leisure Centre (1974-present)	Proposed new leisure centre (2015-2055+)
25m pool (6 lane)	25m pool (up to 10 lanes)
Learner pool	Learner/studio pool
Flume and splash pool (now defunct)	
	Hydrotherapy suite
	Sauna and steam room
8 court hall	8 court hall
4 squash courts	4 squash courts
2 studios	3 / 4 studios
Soft play area	Soft play area
Café	Café
Treatment room (injury/physio)	Treatment rooms (unspecified)
Crèche (now beauty parlour)	
Function room	Multi-purpose rooms
Fitness suite (120 stations)	Fitness suite (150-180 stations)

The table above reveals WCC's proposed areas of expansion: an additional two to four 25m lanes in the swimming pool; a sauna and steam room; a hydrotherapy suite (to be funded and managed separately); an additional 30 to 60 stations in the fitness suite; some additional exercise studio space.

The proposed facility mix emphasises fitness, therefore, rather than sport and leisure. Indeed, River Park Leisure Centre is currently operated with an emphasis on fitness, with the vast majority of local sport and recreational activity taking place outside it.

In order to accommodate, facilitate and enhance local sports provision – and therefore participation – a new centre would need to include: a recognised flexible pool format, ideally a 50m community pool; a large and flexible sportshall, ideally a '15 court' hall with retractable bleacher seating; a recreational gymnastics/trampolining facility. In order to improve Winchester's leisure and recreational offering, facilities such as a climbing wall and leisure water (slides etc) ought to be considered as well.

Not only would the facilities currently proposed by WCC not meet sport and leisure requirements, they do not even appear to reflect the increase in local population since 1974. The district population has increased by over 30,000 during this period:

- District Population (1971 Census) 84,880
- District Population (2011 Census) 116,600

The district population is forecast to be 137,666 by 2026.

The population of Winchester town was 44,714 in 2011, according to the Census that year. If the local population continues to grow at the current rate of more than 8% per decade, the population of Winchester town in 2051 might be expected to be around 62,000. Any investment in strategic facilities, including those for sport and leisure, must anticipate such growth.

2. Proposed Location

The WCC proposals set out two alternative locations: North Walls (the site of the current River Park Leisure Centre) and Bar End.

Key feedback point: Winchester Fit for the Future believes that **Bar End is the only viable location** for a sport and leisure facility that can serve the city and its broader catchment, which includes a significant part of the Winchester District.

(NB: Data from local sports clubs show that people travel to participate in sport in Winchester from beyond the district too, of course, particularly from Chandler's Ford, Eastleigh and surrounding villages to the south of Winchester.)

A larger facility at North Walls would inevitably draw traffic from the surrounding villages and market towns into the city centre, worsening congestion and pollution. In contrast, a facility at Bar End would be accessible to users from the outskirts of the city and its surrounding villages and market towns via the A34, A31, A272, Spitfire Link and M3, as well as other cross-country routes, without coming through the city centre. Other issues relating to North Walls are covered in our location assessment, attached for ease of reference.

Bar End has a number of other advantages, principally the amount of space available for short- and long-term sport and recreational development, and the synergy with existing sports facilities such as the athletics track and sports pitches. Its greater accessibility also offers the prospect of larger footfall and increased revenue – with data from facilities across the country (including Fleming Park in Eastleigh) suggesting that around 1.2 to 1.4 million visits per annum could be expected to a larger, better equipped, more accessible facility close to the motorway.

The WCC exhibition notes a number of challenges that would need to be addressed if Bar End were to accommodate a new sport and leisure facility. These would appear to be surmountable, and several (e.g. archaeological interest, proximity to the South Downs National Park) are at least as much of a challenge in relation to North Walls.

The issue of land ownership at Bar End is rightly one that WCC highlights, and it would take commitment and creativity to address this.

Three of the four major land owners – WCC, the University of Winchester, and Hampshire County Council – have worked together previously at Bar End, to develop the athletics track and synthetic turf pitch. It is reasonable to expect that they could work together again to deliver additional sports facilities at Bar End.

In relation to the Garrison Ground, which is owned by Tesco, the two central questions to address are:

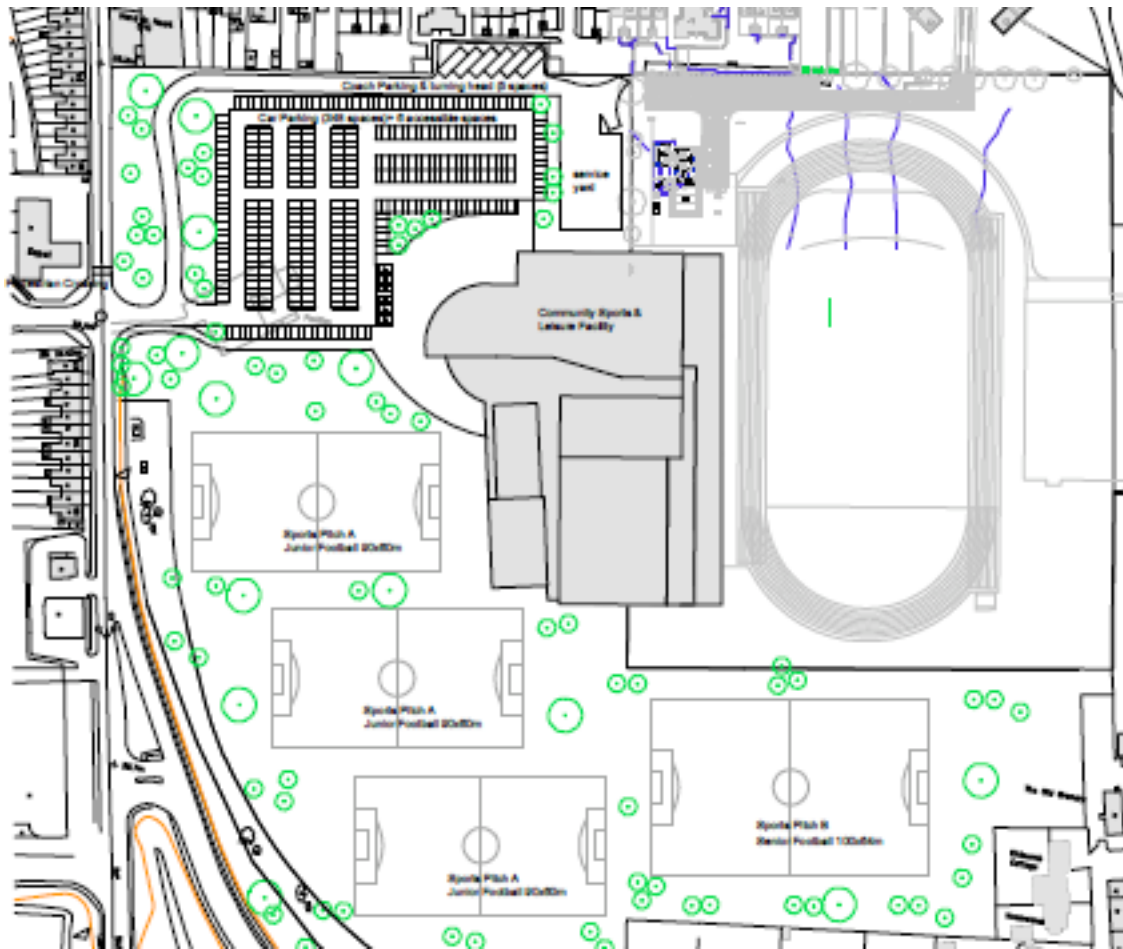
- Is the Garrison Ground needed to accommodate a new sport and leisure facility?
- If it is needed, can it be secured in a way that is affordable and appropriate?

A further important question in the context of sport and recreation is:

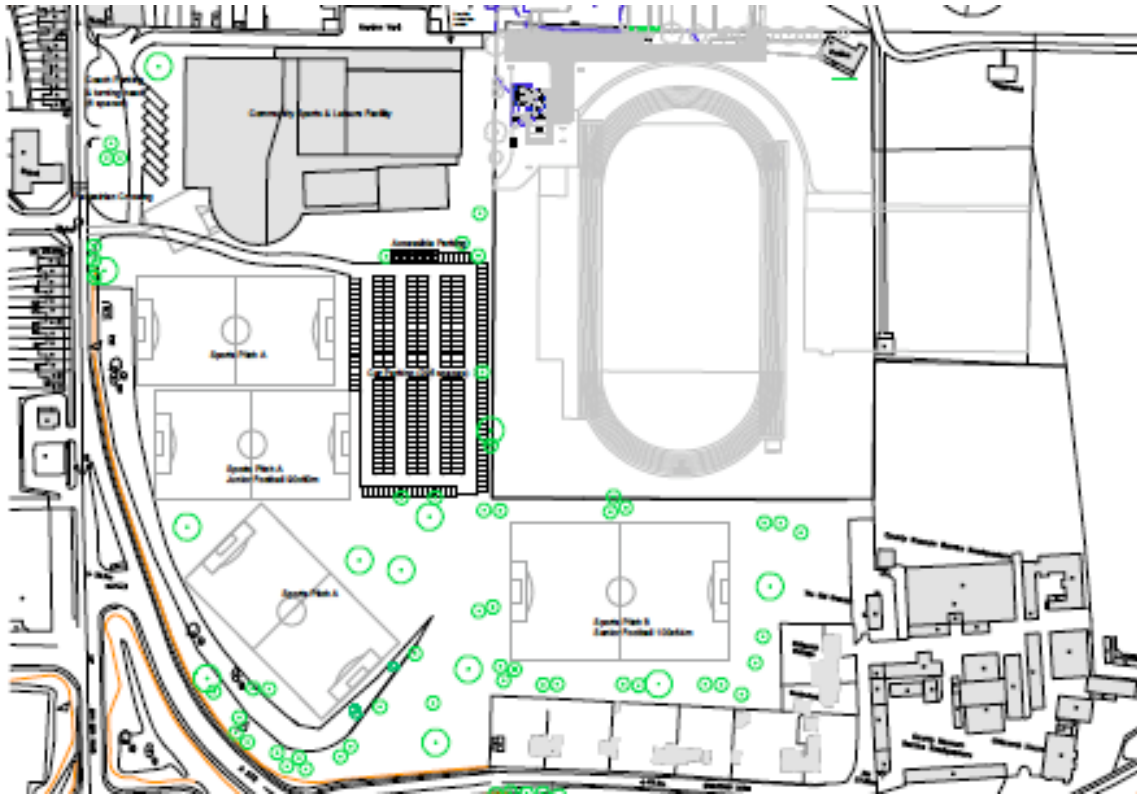
- If the Garrison Ground is not needed and/or cannot be secured for a new sport and leisure facility at this time, can the grass pitches / open space be protected nevertheless, and how?

It appears that there are at least four routes by which the Garrison Ground could be secured, with the majority of open space protected for the long-term. These are:

- Outright purchase of the entire title (“land to the east of Bar End Road”);
- Outright purchase of part of the title (i.e. the land between Bar End Road and the athletics track specifically, adjacent to the Bar End Depot);
- Negotiation (and purchase) of a long leasehold (e.g. 100 – 125 years);
- A joint venture with Tesco, which offers the landowner the prospect of a commercial return on the title in a way that secures the land for sport and recreation. This might entail a balanced development to include, for example, a sport and leisure facility (with the optimal layout shown below) plus a hotel and/or commercial leisure options (e.g. 10-pin bowling, ice rink, cinema), with retention of several pitches and areas of open space.



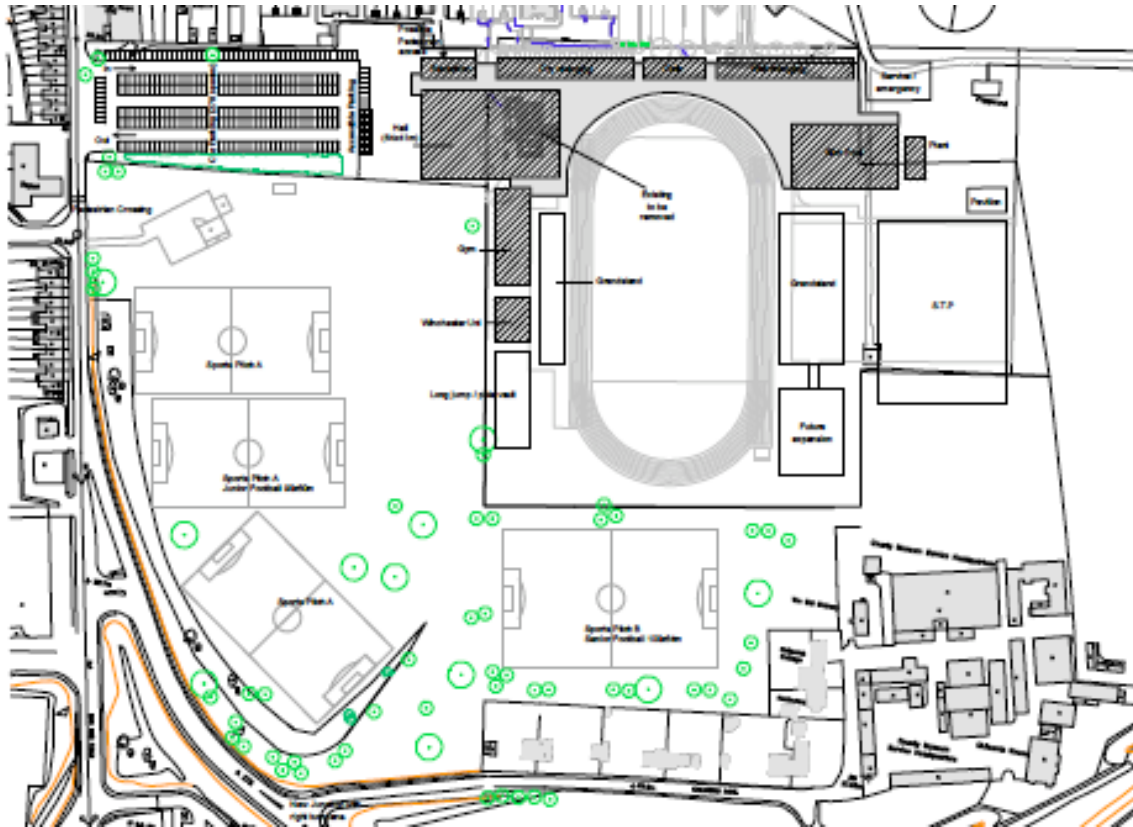
A different configuration would entail the sport and leisure facility being situated on the Bar End Depot, with access and some car parking on part of the Garrison Ground. This would also require a deal to be done regarding the Garrison Ground. A sample layout is shown below:



However, perhaps the car parking could be largely underground – as at the Ponds Forge sports centre in Sheffield – with the facility built above it on the Bar End Depot? This would require very little, if any, of the Garrison Ground to be used – possibly just the right of way that is already preserved in the title deeds, leading through to the athletics track?

There are, further, a number of options to be explored that would enable the necessary facilities to be constructed and serviced, without using the Garrison Ground.

For example, with access off the Bar End Road and car parking on the Bar End Depot, sports and leisure facilities could be clustered around the athletics track. This kind of development could be comprehensive (i.e. all the facilities constructed in one place and at the same time):



Alternatively, development could be completed in modular fashion, with different sports facilities constructed as funds allow. This kind of approach might enable a 'sports park' to be gradually built up, with the River Park Leisure Centre being gradually decommissioned at North Walls. (There would even be scope for some fitness and/or leisure facilities to be redeveloped at North Walls, complementing a more sports-oriented development at Bar End, if this were felt to offer the best all-round solution.) Here is an example of a layout that could be developed in modular fashion:

concerns and provided detailed feedback on these earlier proposals, which I would be happy to share with interested Councillors. The facilities included a 10 lane 50m swimming pool and a “20 court” sportshall/arena – far larger than the facilities proposed by Winchester Fit for the Future, but deemed commercially viable at Bar End by SportHouse.)

We believe the best way to retain the Garrison Ground as a community asset, and to secure its use for sport and recreation, is to develop Bar End as a sports hub. We fear that pressure to develop the Garrison Ground for housing will be relentless otherwise – particularly if the WCC-owned Bar End Depot is sold for housing development, as this would set a precedent for the area.

There is much at stake, therefore, and the decisions that WCC – and other local institutions – now take are vitally important to the future of Winchester.

- Will WCC partner with local institutions to develop the kinds of sports and leisure facilities that can serve the city and surrounding area over the long-term?
- Will WCC seek to protect open space and sports pitches at both Bar End and North Walls, in so far as it is possible to do so?
- Will WCC act to ensure that Bar End is enhanced as a vibrant, well-designed and attractive gateway to the city, not just another housing estate?
- Will WCC explore opportunities to develop the existing River Park LC site in a way that is appropriate and sympathetic to the area’s heritage and character, and consistent with the covenant dictating a focus on culture and leisure?

Such strategic considerations are omitted from the current consultation exercise, but they are of vital importance. They can be addressed through dialogue and collaboration, and with a desire and commitment to do the very best for Winchester. I and my colleagues remain keen to partner with WCC and others to this end, and I look forward to discussing the opportunities soon.

Yours faithfully

Emma Back
Voluntary Director
Winchester Fit for the Future

www.fit4thefuture.org