

INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNMENT

Overall system rating:

Good

# Access to recreation

West Wiltshire District Council

05 March 2007

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Report status	
Date of de-brief	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2006
Draft report issued	31 January 2007
Management responses received	15 February 2007
Final report issued	05 March 2007
Presented to Audit Committee	

Distribution listing
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# 1. Executive summary

## Conclusion

As internal auditors of West Wiltshire District Council (the Council), we are required to give an annual overview of the systems of internal control, in accordance with the Code of Practice on Internal Audit in Local Government in the United Kingdom. In arriving at this overview, we give a conclusion on the individual systems reviewed during the year. Our conclusion is either that the system is good, satisfactory, weak or unacceptable. These are the conclusions used by the Government Internal Audit Standards. However, in giving our conclusion, it should be acknowledged that our work is designed to enable us to form an opinion on the quality of the systems examined based upon the work undertaken during our current review. It should not be relied upon to disclose all weaknesses that may exist and therefore the conclusion is not a guarantee that all aspects of the systems reviewed are adequate and effective.

**From the work performed on the Council's 'access to recreation' initiative, we consider that there is an adequate and effective system of risk management, control and governance to address the risk that objectives are not fully achieved.**

## Scope and objectives of our work

The Council aims to provide a wide range of well planned and managed leisure and recreational opportunities that meet the needs of residents and return high levels of customer satisfaction. The provision of appropriate access to such opportunities forms the focus of one of the Council's six 'spotlight' areas.

There is a risk, however, that resource constraints will result in customer and member expectations not being met. The aim of our audit was to review the Council's arrangements for mitigating this risk.

The specific objectives of our audit were to review the arrangements in place across the Council, which seek to ensure that the Council:

- has a comprehensive understanding of the scope, nature and condition of existing recreational opportunities within the district;
- determines effectively, and in consultation with local residents and service users, the recreational needs of the district;
- identifies and agrees appropriate ways of providing recreational opportunities to meet these needs;
- secures sufficient and sustainable funding to resource this provision; and
- engages effectively with members and local residents.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Council's members and officers for their assistance and co-operation during our review.

# 1. Executive summary

The Council has robust arrangements in place in respect of each of the areas covered by the terms of reference for our review. We set out here some examples of the activities undertaken and arrangements in place in these areas.

Understanding of recreational opportunities	Securing funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Detailed assessment of existing leisure and recreation facilities commissioned and undertaken.</li> <li>✓ Cross-matching of results of assessment to Council's own records and investigation of any discrepancies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Consideration of alternative uses for existing facilities.</li> <li>✓ Robust and effective approach to the use of developer contributions.</li> <li>✓ Consideration of transfer of facilities to local groups or clubs.</li> <li>✓ Application for grant funding where possible,</li> </ul>
Determining recreational needs	Engaging with stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Detailed leisure and recreation needs assessment commissioned and undertaken.</li> <li>✓ Use of user and non-user surveys to gauge demand and customer expectations.</li> <li>✓ Consideration of and reference to local plan and other Council policies and strategies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Extensive consultation with local stakeholders at all stages of the process.</li> <li>✓ Regular meetings of Officer Operational Group and Project Board.</li> <li>✓ Regular reporting to Cabinet and Council.</li> <li>✓ Detailed consultation planned in respect of individual decisions.</li> </ul>
Identifying ways of meeting needs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Assessment of quality and value of existing leisure and recreation provision.</li> <li>✓ Development and implementation of detailed action plan following on from needs assessment.</li> <li>✓ Clear focus on increasing physical activity.</li> <li>✓ Consideration of opportunities for increased partnership working with other organisations in the district.</li> </ul>	

# 1. Executive summary

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Although the Council has robust arrangements in place in each of the areas that we reviewed as part of this audit, there remain a number of key issues that could impact on the Council's ability to achieve its aims in respect of the provision of leisure and recreational opportunities across the district.

The Council is aware of these issues, and is taking steps to address them. However, given the significance of these issues, we would like nevertheless to take this opportunity to bring them to the Council's attention. We have set out further information in respect of these issues, together with details of how the Council is responding to them, in section three of this report.

Key issues are:

- **Potential public and member opposition**
- **Securing capital and revenue funding**
- **Maintaining transparent and objective decision making processes**
- **Countering the localist agenda**
- **Managing the impact on the Council's own resources**

We do not wish to make any recommendations as a result of this review.

## 2. Summary of findings

### Understanding of recreational opportunities

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the recreational opportunities currently provided by the Council across the district, the Council has commissioned a detailed assessment of the availability and condition of such provision. This assessment has looked at a broad range of leisure and recreational opportunities, including allotments, amenity green spaces, recreation grounds, play areas and youth facilities.

In order to ensure the completeness of the opportunities included in this assessment, the Council has cross-matched the results of the assessment with its own records of leisure and recreational facilities, and has resolved any discrepancies between the two.

### Determining recreational needs

In order to determine the leisure and recreational needs of the district, the Council has commissioned a detailed survey of such needs. This has been undertaken in parallel with the assessment of leisure provision outlined above.

This work has been undertaken through a survey of parish and town councils within the district, a survey of local residents and discussions with a range of relevant local stakeholders. The Council is complementing this overall assessment with further surveys of users of particular facilities as well as surveys of people who do not currently use such facilities.

In developing its response to this leisure and recreational needs assessment, the Council has also had regard to other relevant considerations, such as the local plan, other Council strategies and its planning policies.

### Identifying ways of meeting needs

The Council has used the results of the leisure and recreational needs assessment to develop a comprehensive understanding of both the quality and value of existing leisure and recreation provision as well as the recreational needs of the district.

In order to ensure that the availability of recreational opportunities meets demand, the Council has developed a detailed action plan. The action plan covers the period 2006 to 2012 and has been approved by Cabinet. The Council is now working to implement this action plan, focusing initially on indoor facilities and play provision.

In developing its action plan, the Council has maintained a clear focus on increasing physical activity across the district. This seeks to ensure that the Council's actions remain focused and consistent with relevant government targets.

In developing its approach to meeting the recreational needs of the district, the Council is considering opportunities for increased partnership working with other organisations, such as parish councils and local sports clubs.

## 2. Summary of findings

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### Securing funding

Where the Council has identified facilities that are not necessarily needed to meet the recreational needs of the district, it is actively considering alternative uses for these facilities. This includes ways in which these facilities could be used to generate additional funds to support the access to recreation initiative.

The Council is working to make effective use of developer contributions as a means of funding the development of appropriate recreational opportunities, and is also considering the transfer of certain types of facilities to local organisations, groups or sports clubs.

In addition to identifying internal funding for the actions to be taken as part of this initiative, the Council is also working to secure grant funding where appropriate.

### Engaging with stakeholders

The Council has undertaken extensive consultation with local stakeholders at all stages of the access to recreation initiative. The issue of recreational opportunities has also been discussed at Council meetings and will continue to be discussed as the initiative progresses.

The consultation and coordination of internal stakeholders has been ensured through regular meetings of the Officer Operational Group and the Project Board. The leisure and recreational needs assessment and the Council's response to it has also been reported to Cabinet.

The Council is planning to undertake further consultation in respect of decisions to be made regarding individual leisure and recreational facilities at appropriate stages in the roll-out of the initiative.



### 3. Significant issues arising

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Although the Council has robust arrangements in place in each of the areas that we reviewed as part of this audit, there remain a number of key issues that could impact on the Council's ability to achieve its aims in respect of the provision of leisure and recreational opportunities across the district.

The Council is aware of these issues, and is taking steps to address them. However, given the significance of these issues, we would like nevertheless to take this opportunity to bring them to the Council's attention.

- **Potential public and member opposition** – The Council has consulted extensively with members, local residents and other stakeholders in the formulation of its approach to the leisure and recreation needs assessment and the development of the resulting action plan. However, as the process becomes less abstract and more focused on individual sites, the Council will inevitably meet some opposition from local stakeholders in respect of specific proposals or decisions. The Council is aware of this, and proposes to continue with its open and consultative approach to the initiative, in order to ensure that the views of all stakeholders are taken into account at each stage of the process.
- **Securing capital and revenue funding** – In order to implement its strategies in respect of the provision of leisure and recreational opportunities, the Council will need to secure appropriate levels of capital and revenue funding. In order to achieve this, the Council is investigating the different sources of funding available – such as government grants, developer contributions, use of existing resources – and is also considering other options for the provision of facilities, such as their transfer to local parishes or sports clubs.
- **Maintaining transparent and objective decision making processes** – In matching leisure and recreational opportunities to the needs of the district, the Council will have to make some difficult decisions. Given the significance of these decisions, together with the potential for a certain level of local opposition, it is imperative that all decisions taken by the Council are transparent, objective and fully justified. In order to ensure that all decisions are robust and defensible, the Council has developed detailed and consistent processes for the implementation of the leisure and recreational needs action plan, and has developed appropriate criteria for all decisions relating to individual sites.

(continued overleaf)

### 3. Significant issues arising

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- **Countering the localist agenda** – The five towns within the district all have a strong local identity, which can on occasion lead to the development of a localist attitude, known colloquially as the ‘five towns syndrome’. In adopting a district wide approach to the provision of leisure and recreational opportunities, the Council will face circumstances in which this localism is at odds with the level of facilities that it considers appropriate for the district. For example, whilst each town may wish to have a cinema or swimming pool, it is unlikely that the district as a whole requires five of each. The Council is aware of this issue, and has taken a number of actions designed to mitigate its impact. These actions include detailed consultation with local stakeholders, the development of robust decision making processes and ongoing liaison with members and local groups.
- **Managing the impact on the Council’s own resources** – Changes to the nature and level of leisure and recreational opportunities across the district will inevitably impact on certain areas of the Council’s operations. For example, changes to the number or location of leisure centres will impact on the Council’s contract with DC Leisure to manage these facilities. Likewise, any changes to outdoor leisure facilities or open space may impact on the Council’s grounds maintenance activities. The Councils is aware of these issues, and appreciates that they will need to be considered when decisions are made regarding individual sites.

We do not wish to make any recommendations as a result of this review.

# Appendix 1 - Summary of work done and risks reviewed

The specific objectives of our audit were to review the arrangements in place across the Council, which seek to ensure that the Council:

- has a comprehensive understanding of the scope, nature and condition of existing recreational opportunities within the district;
- determines effectively, and in consultation with local residents and service users, the recreational needs of the district;
- identifies and agrees appropriate ways of providing recreational opportunities to meet these needs;
- secures sufficient and sustainable funding to resource this provision; and
- engages effectively with members and local residents.

## Significant risks

### Access to recreation

Resource constraints will result in customer and members expectations in respect of the provision of leisure and recreational opportunities not being met.

Leisure and recreation opportunities may not meet the needs of the district.

The Council may not be able to secure sufficient funding to support the development of the access to recreation initiative.

The Council may encounter opposition from local stakeholders.

## Work Undertaken

Discussions with key members and officers, including:

- Planning and Development Portfolio Holder
- Planning Policy and Conservation Services Manager
- Sustainable Communities Services Manager
- Development Control Services Manager
- Property and Estates Services Manager
- Leisure Manager

Review of relevant documentation, including:

- leisure and recreation needs assessment;
- leisure and recreation action plan and related documents;
- reports to officer and member groups;
- papers to Cabinet.