

# **West Wiltshire Leisure and Recreation Needs and Opportunities Assessment: Summary of Findings**

## **Introduction**

This paper summarises the main findings of our Assessment of Leisure and Recreation Needs and Opportunities in the District. The full report and mapping are not yet complete but we have enough information to provide an overview of local views, the sort of planning policy approach the Council should adopt towards open space, sport and recreation provision, the key issues arising from our assessment and possible ways of resolving them.

### **The Purposes of This Paper**

This paper has two broad purposes:

- To seek Cabinet's agreement to the over-riding objective and key principles we set out below.
- To provide background information to Cabinet on the issues we have identified as part of the assessment of needs and opportunities. We have still to complete some of the more detailed elements of the assessment before we can make firm recommendations on these issues

Accordingly, it briefly covers the following topics:

- The overall objective for open space, sport and recreation provision and key principles that we recommend to the Council. We have put these first so that Cabinet can read the remainder of the paper in the context of them.
- Links between the Assessment and the District's Community Strategy
- What local people have told us
- Our audit of local provision
- A broad outline of how we see future planning policy for open space, sport and recreation in the District
- A summary of the key issues facing the Council and its partners, together with related needs and opportunities

## Objectives and Key Principles

### The Major Issue

There is one major issue facing the Council and its partners which underpins all of this paper and indeed the assessment of needs and opportunities: is it entirely satisfied with the current quantity, quality and distribution of open space and sport and recreation provision across the District, or is there a need to make changes? On the basis of our work to date, it seems clear that the status quo is failing to meet a number of local needs.

### The Over-riding Objective

Accordingly we **recommend** that the Council adopt a broad objective for open space, sports and recreation provision along the lines of:

*To ensure that the District has a network of accessible, high quality spaces and sport and recreation facilities which makes West Wiltshire a place to be proud of, meets local needs and enhances the "liveability" of the District, promotes sustainability, supports bio-diversity and makes the best use of land*

### The Guiding Principles

Related to this objective, and deriving directly from the various strategies we have reviewed, our local consultations and the results of our audit, we recommend that the Council also adopt five guiding principles

- The District's greenspaces and sport and recreation facilities should be a source of local pride
- Throughout most of the District, improving the quality of provision is more important than increasing and in some cases possibly even maintaining the quantity of it
- The Council should use the planning system to protect those greenspaces and sport and recreation facilities which are of real benefit to local communities and most valued by them.
- Improving the quality or accessibility of local provision, or both, will clearly be in the best long term interest of local communities throughout the District. This may require the District, Parish or Town Councils to enhance or dispose of some spaces or facilities order to concentrate their limited resources on others which are of greater benefit to local communities. As a broad principle, if the District, Town or Parish Councils dispose of any provision which is of little benefit to local communities, they should re-invest the proceeds in other provision in the community in which that provision is located. This also implies close liaison with local communities so that they can see the benefits which will flow from any proposals disposals.
- The District, Parish and Town Councils should seek to involve local communities in the management of the

greenspaces which benefit them most.

## Links to Existing Strategies

This assessment links directly to a number of strategies already adopted by the Council. Two of the high level objectives in the community strategy, *West Wiltshire – A Place to be Proud Of*, are particularly relevant:

- Improving the health of the people of West Wiltshire
- Improving opportunities for young people

As part of implementing the strategy, the Local Strategic Partnership is already committed to:

- Promoting healthy lifestyles
- Promoting the participation of residents in local environments
- Encouraging the use of parks and open spaces and ensuring access for all
- Concentrating on the regeneration of Melksham, Trowbridge and Westbury
- Improving provision for sustainable transport, including the creation of a District-wide network of cycleways to be funded partly from planning agreements
- Encouraging greater use of leisure facilities by young people and disadvantaged families
- Developing leisure opportunities that focus on encouraging increased levels of participation in physical activity
- Providing well cared-for parks, open spaces, playing fields and children's play areas
- Increasing the number of people who participate in sport, focusing on rural areas, young people and the disadvantaged

There is also a specific reference to this assessment in the Community Strategy: "the Council will develop policies and initiatives to ensure that the recommendations of the assessment are carried out".

As an initial step in the assessment, we reviewed a range of relevant strategy documents prepared by the Council and its partners and discovered a lot of common ground within them. The most important points for the PPG17 assessment are:

### **Key Community Views**

- Concerns for the local environment
- Concerns that there is not enough provision for young people
- Concerns for the maintenance of town parks and children's play facilities

### **Implications for the Assessment**

- A need to pay particular attention to the needs of young people
- A need to have convincing arguments for the disposal of any existing greenspaces
- A need for the infrastructure which will allow local residents to be more active – for example, sports facilities, pedestrian routes and cycleways
- Maximising use of existing leisure facilities and greenspaces such as parks
- A concern for sustainability and equality of opportunity, the former of which may suggest changes to greenspace maintenance regimes and fewer “green deserts”
- A need to find ways of involving local people more in their local environment
- A need to ensure that the District makes the effective use of planning agreements
- A need to recognise the importance of the high quality countryside in West Wiltshire
- A need to move away from the NPFA Six Acre Standard
- A need to promote the dual use of school land and facilities
- A need for new cemeteries in Bradford and Melksham
- A need to review the SPG on *Open Space in Housing Developments*
- A need to pay attention to community safety in parks and other greenspaces

For obvious reasons, we have sought to reflect these points in the recommended objective and principles above.

### **West Wiltshire – A Place To Be Proud Of**

There is one other general comment we wish to make. This is that our work so far has identified that West Wiltshire already has quite a lot to be proud of, but doesn't seem to be doing much to let its local community know about these things. This means that it already has good foundations in place which will help it deliver at least the elements of the Community Strategy which relate to this assessment. For example:

- The partnership with DC Leisure (DCL) is a valuable one which goes well beyond a basic management agreement and the Quest accreditation for all eight sites is a very real achievement. We suggest that WWDC and DCL could promote their achievements more effectively to local people; residents need to know how well the service is doing, including the valuable work being done in health promotion. This is high on the Government's agenda.
- The partnership with DC Leisure has delivered significant facility and service improvements in the past few years, as well as unusually high levels of participation in sport and physical activity by women
- By and large, children's equipped play areas provided and managed by the Council are better maintained than those in many other areas of the country
- By and large, the Council has an excellent working relationship with the Parish and Town Councils in its area
- The best greenspaces within the District, such as Trowbridge Park, are excellent and a source of local pride

## What Local People Have Said

We have sought to establish local views in four main ways:

- Through a survey of *People's Voice* panel members
- Through a survey of *Tomorrow's Voice* panel members, the results of which are not yet available
- Through a survey of the views of Parish and Town Councils
- Through interviews with representatives of local stakeholder organizations or interest groups suggested by the Council

### *The People's Voice Panel/Stakeholder Interviews*

Broadly speaking the results of both our *People's Voice* survey and our in-depth interviews can be summed up quite simply: the West Wiltshire community wants better rather than more provision and this generalisation applies in each of the five community areas. However, in terms of more provision:

- **Bradford** area residents want only cinema provision, although a sizeable minority would like more woodland, tranquil water and teenage facilities
- **Melksham** area residents also identify a need for tranquil water areas, while a sizeable minority see a need for more access to the countryside, nature conservation, street trees, teenage facilities, cinemas and theatre or concert venues
- **Trowbridge** area residents would like additional country parks or commons (in spite of the fact that Southwick is on their doorstep), nature conservation, woodland areas, tranquil water and cinemas, while a sizeable minority would like to see better countryside access, street trees, teenage facilities and theatre or

- concert venues
- **Westbury** area residents would like more nature conservation areas, while sizeable minorities would like more countryside access, woodland, tranquil water areas, teenage facilities, cinemas and theatre or concert venues
- **Warminster** area residents identified only a need for more teenage facilities, although sizeable minorities would like more nature conservation and tranquil water areas

#### *Parish and Town Council Views*

We do not yet have a response to our survey from all of the District's Parish and Town Councils, although we hope to have most if not all of the results by the date of the Cabinet meeting. Meantime, in summary the views of those which have responded at the date of writing this paper are:

- Most parishes require very little, if any, additional provision. However, some parishes have identified a need for limited new provision which, in the main can be classed as activity spaces (eg play areas, tennis courts) rather than countryside, public greenspaces or indoor facilities.
- Good quality spaces or facilities significantly outnumber poor or very poor ones
- The main spaces or facilities that Parish or Town Councils see themselves as responsible for managing and maintaining are local recreation grounds, children's play areas, grass pitches and village halls

Although not identified during our local consultations, some of the Parish and Town Councils are facing a need to alter their village halls in order to make them compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

## **Audit of Provision**

We have audited the quality and value (in the sense of value to people or wildlife, not monetary value) of around 300 sites across the District grouped into a typology of six separate greenspace categories: allotments, bowling greens, green corridors, pitches and courts, play areas and multi-functional greenspaces. This latter category includes amenity spaces, churchyards and cemeteries, natural greenspaces and parks and gardens. We have also audited the condition of the District's indoor sports facilities. The resulting database, if kept up to date, will provide the District, Town and Parish Councils with a tool for monitoring the overall quality of the District's greenspaces and sports facilities.

The main findings of the audit are:

- **Allotments:** poor to average quality but reasonably high value
- **Bowling Greens:** as in most other areas, high quality

and high value and although there are relatively few bowling greens compared to other areas this does not seem to be a cause for dissatisfaction

- **Multi-functional greenspaces** (amenity spaces, churchyards and cemeteries, natural greenspaces and parks and gardens): generally reasonable quality but varied value; many have litter or vandalism problems
- **Pitches and courts:** generally poor quality, with poor drainage and sometimes poor or no changing, and limited value. The one and two pitch sites in the main towns are not generally cost-effective.
- **Equipped Play areas:** generally good quality and value, but sometimes the equipment is fairly old or sites do not appear to be well used. By and large, WWDC play facilities are in better condition than those owned by Parishes, but the maintenance cost must be high for the benefits they deliver to children. The play facilities in the best condition of all are on primary school sites although the range of equipment is often limited and there is sometimes no access out of school hours.
- **Indoor sports facilities:** the District has a good range of public, dual use and school indoor sports facilities, but several date from the seventies, are showing their age and will need major refurbishment or replacement in the next few years. Overall the quality of most facilities is reasonable, but a number are not DDA-compliant.

## Future Planning Policy

It is clear that there is no real need for significantly more provision within the District. We have still to assess accessibility to ensure that there is no unnecessary duplication of provision or significant areas of the District which lack reasonably good access to provision. This may identify some needs for additional provision or opportunities to “move around” some existing provision by disposing of some spaces to create others in better locations. For obvious reasons, any such proposals will have to take full account of any existing legal or planning agreements. However, in general the aim of the District’s planning policies should be to enhance quality rather than increase the quantity of provision, especially from infill and other small developments which will increase the demand pressures on existing community infrastructure.

This means that, in general, the Council should seek financial contributions from developers which – possibly in partnership with the appropriate Town or Parish Councils – it can then use to enhance existing provision, except where there may be major developments on greenfield sites. This will also have the advantage that by not requiring significant additional provision the Council will not be storing up long term problems for its greenspace maintenance budget.

As part of the assessment, we will be providing the Council with draft planning policies, a related Supplementary Planning Document a means of calculating the

contributions that it can require developers to make towards enhanced local provision.

## Key Issues

We have identified a number of key issues for the future of open space, sport and recreation provision the District:

- Countryside access and the canals
- Greenspace management and maintenance
- Indoor sports provision
- Provision for children's play
- Provision for pitch sports
- Provision for teenagers
- Provision for water sports
- The future of Southwick Country Park
- Tree cover
- Working with schools
- Funding

We make a number of comments in relation to each of these issues below, by way of illustration of their importance. At this stage, we are not putting forward any firm proposals for Cabinet to agree or reject – this will come later - but its general reaction to our comments will be a valuable input to the remainder of our work.

### Countryside Access and the Canals

Issue: how can the Council and its partners maximise access to the countryside for both active and passive active recreation?

#### *Needs*

The District has a good number of rights of way and other paths giving access to the countryside, although some of them start or end at fairly busy roads without footpaths, especially around Westbury and Melksham, and more could be done to make them into a “spider’s web network. There is also a problem with vehicle use of bridleways and countryside paths. Most wooded areas are in private ownership and access can be limited. The countryside must be one of the attractions of living in the District, especially for those living in the villages.

Many of the main roads in the District are dangerous for cycling and it will be very difficult to promote cycling unless the Council can ensure there is a network of safe routes separate from roads. The Sustrans Report undertaken in 2002 on inter-urban cycle routes in the District offers a useful way forward although some of the routes are too circuitous for commuting. The multi-use path alongside the A363 between Bradford and Trowbridge is also a good example of how to encourage cycling.

#### *Opportunities*



Each of the five main towns is only a fairly easy cycling distance from at least one of the others. The canals offer predominantly level routes and the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath forms part of the Bristol – London National Cycle Route 4. There are also parts of National Route 24 in the Warminster-Longleat area. WWWDC should see these routes as the cycling equivalent of motorways and develop its network of local cycle routes in order to maximise access to them. The proposed Wiltshire and Berkshire canal link from Semington to Melksham also offers an opportunity to create a more effective cycle route between Trowbridge and Melksham.

### **Greenspace Management and Maintenance**

Issue: local communities through the District would like to see their local greenspaces managed and maintained better

#### *Needs*

Given that there is little need for significant new provision, we will probably recommend that improving management and maintenance should be the Council's priority. This will require either an increase in the grounds maintenance budget, which may be impossible to achieve without "robbing Peter to pay Paul", or a reduction in the range of spaces managed and maintained by the Council while retaining its present revenue budget. Accordingly we propose to concentrate on the latter approach, although there will almost inevitably be strong opposition to any proposed disposals.

#### *Opportunities*

We have invited the Parish and Town Councils, and our individual consultees, to nominate "wasted spaces" in their areas, although we have received only a handful of suggestions. We have also identified some possible wasted spaces ourselves, but have further work to do to establish whether this really is the case. For the moment, therefore, we are not making any recommendations in relation to possible disposals.

Nor are we making any specific recommendations for changes to maintenance regimes in order to reduce the cost of maintaining some sites. However, some of the measures we may suggest in our final report are:

- Requiring that the highest profile and best used spaces and facilities in the District are maintained to the highest standards, if necessary at the expense of some secondary spaces. This implies moving to a hierarchy of maintenance, rather than a consistent approach across all the spaces maintained by the Council. One of the Council's aims should be to get and then retain

- Green Flag awards for its main parks.
- Encouraging the development of “Friends” groups who will work with WWDC to manage local spaces more cost-effectively and promote nature conservation better
- Encouraging the Parish and Town Councils to take greater responsibility for the maintenance of the spaces in their areas, and, ideally, drive the District’s involvement in the Britain in Bloom competition. This is a relatively cheap and almost certainly very popular way of giving the appearance and local communities a major “lift” each summer. However, we caution that transferring maintenance responsibilities will merely move the cost from one public budget to another and will not increase the aggregate amount of money available. Parish and Town Councils are likely to argue that devolved responsibilities should be reflected in devolved budgets.

### Indoor Sports Provision

Issue: the District has a good range of indoor sports provision but there is a growing need for refurbishment or replacement

#### *Needs*

A significant proportion of the District’s indoor sports facilities are on school sites and managed by schools on a “gatekeeper” basis rather than to maximize community use. Some are also owned and operated by independent schools. Unusually, the District has two “wet and dry” centres, in Warminster and Trowbridge. Such centres are normally more cost-effective than separate provision, especially in areas such as West Wiltshire, and also encourage “cross-over” visits by users, for example swimmers choosing to play badminton or vice versa. The table below summarises the amount of provision in the District compared with the amount suggested as needed by the Sport England *Sports Facilities Calculator*:

	<b>Required</b>	<b>Available</b>
• Pools (sq m water)	1,185	1,540
• Sports halls (badminton courts)	33	46
• Indoor bowls (rinks)	7.5	4

This suggests that the District needs no more pools or sports halls, but may need some additional indoor bowling facilities. We understand, however, that there was considerable criticism of the removal of two of the rinks at the Christie Miller Centre some time ago in order to create a tenpin bowling facility, although here is a reasonably recent 6-rink centre in Chippenham and a 2-rink private centre at Sanderwick. This assumes all of the existing pools and halls continue and are in full community use at peak times, although there must be a question mark over the future of at least the Westbury Pool (although as this is listed, and not the Council’s property, the extent to which

it can be converted to another use may be limited), the Castle Place Leisure Centre and the Christie Miller Centre. It may be desirable to consider replacing these facilities. In particular, Christie Miller and the Westbury Pool offer poorer facilities than customers can justifiably expect, while the location of the Castle Place Centre can charitably be described as poor.

Our general comments on indoor sports provision and management are:

- We will be surprised if the District remains without a commercial health and fitness club for much longer unless it invests in improving public provision. A high quality commercial club would inevitably divert users and income from DCL-managed facilities, to the detriment of the public service. The Council and DCL need to ensure that what they offer is as good as a competitor might provide.

#### *Opportunities*

The opportunities we have identified so far include:

- DCL may be willing to consider additional investment in sports facilities (and it has already invested over £2M in the District) but this will probably require extension of the present contract.
- DCL staff could support more effective club development on school sites they do not manage (see Working with Schools, below).
- The possible relocation and expansion of the fitness element of the Castle Place Centre, for example at the Civic Hall adjoining Trowbridge Park
- Refurbishment of the Trowbridge Sports Centre – not necessarily immediately, but within the next few years - and possible construction of an artificial turf pitch designed for football on the outdated Redgra area; possibly also the development of a netball centre on the present tennis courts
- Replacement of the Christie Miller Centre
- Possible replacement of the Melksham Blue Pool on a new site, funded by the sale of the present site
- Possible replacement of the Westbury Pool on a new site. The present building has many attractive features and it may be suitable for some other civic use.

#### **Provision for Children's Play**

**Issue:** The District has a lot of small equipped children's play areas of a traditional design which offer relatively little stimulation and excitement to most children.

#### *Needs*

The main weaknesses of existing play areas are:

- Muddiness in wet weather – while there is often a very small piece of tarmac at the entrance to a play area, getting to it, from inside or outside the area, can often involve wading through mud. As a result, parents will tend not to take their children to play.
- Very limited equipment on some sites. In some cases, what is on offer may be no more than some children will have in their own garden.
- Location: some play areas are located at the end of culs-de-sac, where they may serve very few young children, or be tucked away and can be quite difficult to find. More important, this means they may not be subject to effective passive surveillance from nearby dwellings or passers-by. Ideally, play areas should be located close to well used pedestrian routes.

Resolving these issues for future play areas will simply be a matter of developing a suitable quality standard for developers to follow. For existing ones, we suggest the Council reviews and where possible rationalises the overall level of provision in the light of our assessment. Areas in which this may be possible include the Longfield Estate in Trowbridge or Timor Road in Westbury. For many sites, however, it will be a matter of providing additional tarmac or other hard surfaces.

### *Opportunities*

In the five towns, and some of the larger villages, the District and Town or Parish Councils may have an opportunity to rationalise and improve play provision by developing a new approach based on bigger, better and more imaginative, but almost certainly fewer, play facilities.

### **Provision for the Pitch Sports**

Issue: there is inadequate provision for the pitch sports in the District, especially for football in Westbury and Trowbridge.

### *Needs*

While there is higher than average participation in junior football, there are two important weaknesses in football within the District: most of the football “clubs” are actually just single teams and there is an apparently sharp fall-off from junior to adult play. This suggests a problem in the transition from junior to adult play, which appears to relate to both the poor drainage and therefore playing characteristics of many pitches and a lack of adult pitches. There is also a shortage of adult rugby pitches.

At present, the various clubs in the District see their greatest need as being for more grass pitches. This brings with it a need to use a significant area of land for pitches

and, as ground conditions are generally poor across the District, significant capital expenditure. The best approach will be to develop a small number of multi-pitch sites as one or two pitch sites are very poor value for money. Moreover, the income which a grass pitch can generate is well below its annual maintenance cost.

### *Opportunities*

The recent approval of artificial turf pitches (ATPs) by UEFA, the European governing body for football, may create the opportunity to meet the demand for football by persuading clubs to move from Saturday and Sunday daylight leagues on grass pitches to midweek leagues on floodlit ATPs. Ideally, these ATPs should be on school sites where they can also support school PE programmes and the development of after-school clubs. Moat should be designed primarily for football as there is already generous artificial turf provision for hockey within the District. Although it will probably have to do so, the Football Association has not yet approved the use of artificial surfaces for league matches. When it does, we expect new floodlit leagues to form rapidly and reduce the demand for grass pitches at the weekend. This will allow the development of new multi-team and multi-age clubs which can offer coaching or participation opportunities every night of the week and tackle the inherent problems with football at present noted above.

This approach will probably have comparable overall capital costs to grass pitches, but require much less land and fewer changing pavilions. It will therefore be much better value for money. Furthermore, it may have three additional financial benefits:

- It may result in the County Council becoming a funding partner whether on existing school sites or new PPP ones
- The District Council may be able to fund at least part of its share of the capital costs from the sale of one or two pitch sites, subject of course to the acceptability of this in terms of wider planning policy.
- The revenue cost of maintaining an ATP is roughly similar to the cost of maintaining a grass one. However, as the number of ATPs required will be much less than the number of grass pitches, the total maintenance cost will be much less. In addition, ATP owners can set higher charges than the owners of grass pitches.

We have also identified some site-specific opportunities and will be making specific recommendations in relation to them in our final report:

- **The Lafarge Sports Ground:** the site could accommodate five adult pitches (or various combinations of adult and junior pitches) for rugby or football at a capital cost of around £600,000 plus VAT

and £30,000 for annual maintenance thereafter. There will also be a need for a changing pavilion which will cost at least as much again. These costs will have to be met by WWDC, less any external funding it can attract. This will create a site capable of accommodating an aggregate of around 5-6 hours of use per pitch per week, or an aggregate of 25-30 hours of adult use per week. Assuming this use is concentrated into Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings, the site will lie idle for around 120 or so hours per week. If the District Council opts to develop a number of ATPs for football, Lafarge may offer an excellent new site for Trowbridge Rugby Club, although we understand it is currently investigating a site in Hilperton

- In **Westbury**, Persimmon Homes recently relinquished an option over the Redland Lane playing field owned by Matravers School. The company had earlier indicated that if granted planning consent for housing on the Redland Lane site, it was willing to provide five adult pitches, three junior pitches, a cricket square, an all-weather pitch and changing accommodation and parking on land at Leigh Park. This would have created an opportunity for the Council to achieve, at no cost, one of the multi-pitch centres suggested in our earlier report on pitches in Westbury and Trowbridge. It may be desirable to try to resurrect this proposal, which in terms of open space and sport and recreation provision – and school PE provision for that matter – appears to offer far more than protecting the present school pitches, provided of course that it is acceptable in terms of wider planning policy.
- In **Yarnbrook**, the Baxter Trust owns a flat site of some 16 ha and has proposed the development of new pitches for Trowbridge Football Club. It appears that the Trust is willing to negotiate the sale of the land. The development costs will be similar to the Lafarge site, ie around £100,000 per pitch plus the costs of a pavilion. Against this, the site is fairly remote.
- In North Bradley, where we understand there may be a possible new site for Trowbridge Town Football Club

### **Provision for Teenagers**

Issue: Too often, teenage provision across the District is limited to rather forlorn basketball hoops, some ball courts or walls, and some teenage shelters, mainly on recreation grounds. Whilst Melksham has a very good skateboard park, provision for BMX and skateboarding elsewhere in the District is limited. The BMX track at Studley Green in Trowbridge is valued by teenagers but does not comply with good practice design standards.

### *Needs*

As a result of the lack of provision for them, in many areas teenagers have colonised play facilities intended for younger children and their quality suffers as a result. The *People's Voice* survey and local interviews have both identified a need for more teenage facilities. However, it can be difficult to find suitable sites in built up areas, although there should be a good teenage facility in each of the five towns

### *Opportunities*

There may be an opportunity to provide some major teenage facilities in the country parks.

## **Provision for Water Sports**

Issue: The District has only a limited amount of water space for sailing and canoeing and the direct access to the nearest coast means passing through the Bath-Bristol area with its traffic congestion. Shearwater is very attractive and used for a range of water sports but limited in size and slightly peripheral to much of the District's population. The Cotswold Water Park is on the northern boundary of the County, but also not readily accessible to most potential West Wiltshire water sports participants. Anglers, however, have been successful in establishing access to many of the small areas lakes which exist within the District.

### *Needs*

West Wiltshire Sailing Club has a base by the railway station in Westbury but the water area it uses is silting up. As it has no security of tenure it is completely unable to attract any grant aid. It has suggested the creation of a new sailing lake in the northern part of Southwick Country Park, and if given suitable security of tenure by the Council will be able to seek grants for this purpose.

### *Opportunities*

Parts of the canals passing through the District are already well used for canoeing and there may be opportunities to develop this further, ideally linked to cycling routes.

There appears to be an opportunity to develop a water sports lake in Southwick Country Park – see below.

## **The Future of Southwick Country Park**

Issue: Southwick is a country park in name only. It is used mainly by dog walkers, perhaps partly because it offers only a very limited range of other things to do and partly because the District Council puts very little effort into

managing it. As the District has an excellent network of rights of way it is unlikely to attract large numbers of people unless it can offer something different. At present there is little reason for most people to visit it.

### *Needs*

The Council's original purpose in purchasing Southwick was to create a golf course, hotel and public leisure centre. However, there is now no need to consider using the site for an indoor leisure centre. In terms of golf, about 110 – 120 acres is adequate for an 18-hole course with good nature conservation value whilst retaining some of the path network. However, there are four points we wish to make in relation to a possible golf course. First, an 18-hole course at Thoulstone closed some time ago, presumably as it was not viable. Second, and related to this, local golf clubs do not have significant waiting lists, so provision is not currently constraining demand. Third, a number of golf course developers, such as Clubhaus, have had their fingers burned in recent years and are likely to be interested only in areas where there it is clear there is a high level of unmet demand. They will probably also want to be able to develop significant “executive” housing around the periphery which may well be unacceptable to the local community and/or the Council as planning authority. Finally, there could be strong local opposition to a “private” golf club taking up most of the park area. The alternative might be for the District Council to develop a pay and play 9-hole course on say 50-60 acres and enhance the remainder for other uses.

There seem to be few realistic alternatives to keeping the park; current planning policy does not allow its sale for development (and a change would open the council to accusations of acting egregiously). Nor will it be desirable to have any large buildings in the park and it probably has only limited value for agriculture.

### *Opportunities*

Southwick is more than large enough to accommodate a range of different uses simultaneously. As a preliminary step, therefore, we suggest that the Council should establish exactly what covenants there are in place which may restrict the use of the land. When this is known, some of options it may be sensible to investigate – in no particular order - include:

- Increasing the amount of woodland to give the park a better structure and enhanced habitats and build on the nature conservation work that has already taken place
- A water sports lake and clubhouse, assuming all of the spoil from the site of lake can be used to re-contour other parts of the site
- A major facility skateboarding facility for teenagers



- Investigate the potential for say a dedicated mountain biking area and cycle routes
- A camp site; this would not necessarily require any capital or revenue expenditure by the Council if it lease part of the park to an organisation such as the Caravan Club
- Sports pitches. This has already been suggested but soil conditions across much of the site are poor and any pitches will need to be built to a very high specification and therefore expensive. Probably the areas best suited to pitches are also those most remote from nearby roads, so creating pitches may also create the need for significant roadways.
- Reconsidering the Hope Nature Centre proposals to see if it will be possible to locate them where they will complement other facilities in the park
- A showground for local events
- A pay and play golf course, initially with 9 holes but with the potential to move to 18 if there is sufficient demand. Alternatively the Council might consider advertising part a large part of the site for development as a commercial golf course with covenants to maintain footpath access and ensure that the course is designed to promote nature conservation value

We understand that officers are putting a paper on Southwick to Cabinet in the next few months.

### **Tree Cover**

Issue: the low level of tree cover across much of the District, in both towns and the countryside, is very noticeable and significantly reduces amenity in both the towns and countryside

#### *Needs*

We understand that the lack of tree cover is in large part a consequence of the severe outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease some years ago. It is time to do something about tree planting in the District. Trees have a many positive attributes; for example, they provide shade, they remove particulates and pollution from the air, they lower the temperature on hot days in urban areas and they improve the setting of buildings and can considerably enhance local amenity.

#### *Opportunities*

In our final report we are likely to recommend that the Council should seek to increase the amount of tree cover in the District, for example by developing a programme of urban forestry and requiring developers to plant or fund trees.

### **Working with Schools**

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Issue: Out of hours access to school facilities varies from one school to another across the District. Some are locked, others more or less open access but with little informal community use. The independent schools probably do most to support local sport and recreation, but some are sited away from centres of population so their impact is limited.

### *Needs*

Like community indoor sports facilities, there is a growing need to modernise school indoor facilities. At the same time, there is a need to promote better school club-community club links and pathways.

### *Opportunities*

As noted above, WWDC has an opportunity to work more closely with the County Council and school governors to develop artificial turf pitches and community pitch sport clubs. Where a school has indoor facilities which are suitable for community use, there is an obvious opportunity to widen the concept of the community club to include indoor activities. Given DCL's excellent work in District Council facilities, there will be much to be said for persuading schools and the County Council that they should also manage these clubs. This will both ensure that they are professionally run and prevent unnecessary competition for users between school and community sites.

Most of the secondary schools already have community use arrangements with individual sports clubs such as basketball at St Augustine's and table tennis at John of Gaunt in Trowbridge. There is a clear opportunity to co-ordinate and promote these arrangements more effectively. For example, in Trowbridge, sports specific clubs should be available seamlessly to pupils attending any of the three secondary schools. The clubs themselves could benefit from support to reach accredited status in terms of coach development, volunteer practices and child protection. In time, schools and clubs could be more self-reliant if assisted with operational issues, health and safety matters to a standard similar to the District's leisure centres.

The approach could be to use revenue-subsidised dry leisure centre facilities such as sports halls mainly as gateways to introduce adults and children to new sports experiences. Those who have interest in a particular sport can then be referred to sports specific clubs, usually at school sites, geared up to welcome new members and cater for their needs. Such an approach has implications for the leisure contract as marketing wisdom suggests that it is several times more costly to attract new customers than to retain the current ones.



## Funding

Issue: the District Council is finding it difficult to fund the status quo properly, especially in relation to management and maintenance. Improving management and maintenance regimes, not to mention any new provision that may be needed, may therefore be unaffordable.

### *Needs*

Given that there is little need for much in the way of new provision, the main need is for the Council either to increase its revenue funding of greenspace maintenance or reduce the amount of greenspace it maintains. We have raised this possibility above; the latter seems the more fruitful approach as, unfortunately, external capital funding is a lot easier to obtain than revenue support, and especially long term revenue support.

### *Opportunities*

The only suggestions for external capital funding we have to offer for the moment are:

- The Forestry Commission or Countryside Agency might provide some capital and time-limited revenue funding for additional woodland areas, for example at Southwick Country Park, or urban forestry.
- The various Lottery funds. However, Lottery and other external funding is becoming more and more difficult to obtain, especially in “good” areas such as West Wiltshire without major social problems

This means that, apart from disposing of under-used sites, the Council will probably have to try to use any capital investment it can afford or attract to reduce its maintenance costs.

One possible source of capital funding for this purpose will be to make better use of planning agreements, although expectations of what it is possible for developers to fund are rising rapidly and may soon become unrealistic. In addition, the current position with regard to planning agreements is a little vague because the Government recently published a draft circular designed to clarify DoE Circular 1/97, *Planning Agreements*. Although several times the length of the original Circular it does not succeed particularly well in this aim. It seems likely that Councils’ scope to require commuted maintenance payments as well as financial contributions from developers will be very limited. Accordingly the Council’s broad policy should probably be to maximise its use of planning agreements in order to generate funds it will use to reduce maintenance costs, but without simply redesigning spaces to make them uniformly boring and suitable only for machine maintenance.

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