

**Wiltshire Council**

**Environment Select Committee**

**18 July 2024**

---

## **Leisure Strategy and the Warminster Project**

### **Leisure Services**

#### **Executive summary**

In Environment Select Committee meeting on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2024, a statement from a member of the public about the Warminster Project was received. It was agreed that the Director of Leisure, Culture and Communities would be invited to the next meeting to discuss the overall strategy for leisure, and to reply to some of the more specific comments made in the statement.

#### **Proposal**

That the committee:

- a) Are re-informed about, and understand the strategy for leisure, alongside the framework for decision making.
- b) Are provided with the response from the Director of Leisure, Culture and Communities on the public statement made at 4<sup>th</sup> June ESC around the specific project in Warminster and have the opportunity to ask questions as appropriate.

#### **Reason for proposal**

For a full response to be provided to committee by the appropriate officer following the 4<sup>th</sup> June meeting in relation to comments on the Warminster Project for the fitness suite relocation and expansion.

**Author:** David Redfern

Contact details: david.redfern@wiltshire.gov.uk

# Leisure Strategy and the Warminster Project

## Purpose of report

1. To discuss leisure strategy more generally and how this relates to a statement made by a member of the public at the June meeting of the committee about the Warminster project.

## Background

2. The Director of Leisure, Culture and Communities presented to this committee in March 2024 and noted the work on improving the sustainability of the service, mainly through increased fitness memberships.
3. Leisure is a non-statutory service. Many local authorities have made the decision to reduce their leisure offer when faced with budget difficulties. In some instances, local authorities have ceased to deliver leisure services entirely. Wiltshire Council is bucking this national trend, principally by rigorously focussing on improving financial sustainability, but also by demonstrating the significant role the provision of high-quality leisure services plays in improving population health.
4. A key aspect of Wiltshire Council's mission is to ensure residents "... are empowered to live full, healthy and enriched lives", including the ability to "stay active", while the council's guiding themes include prevention and early intervention and improving social mobility and tackling inequalities.
5. As such, the structure for Leisure, Culture and Communities includes a direct link with Public Health to ensure all services provide the greatest health benefit to the Wiltshire population and support delivery of the Council's prevention agenda.
6. The Leisure, Culture and Communities Service Plan details several priorities that investment in Warminster Sport Centre will support, including:
  - *Ensure our leisure centres, libraries and other buildings are fit for purpose and accessible to all, are well maintained and financially sustainable and support the Councils target to achieve Net Zero by 2030.*
  - *Increase sports and physical activity participation amongst all Wiltshire residents but specifically those that face the greatest barriers to participation, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to stay active.*
  - *Align all services areas with Public Health priorities to empower healthy and safe behaviours and to give everyone the opportunity to 'start well'.*
7. The £10.6m capital budget allocation is being used to modernise centres. Any investment is assessed against its ability to improve financial sustainability, to maximise income, and to support public health objectives, with significant due diligence undertaken. It has not been allocated to simply maintain existing facilities.

## **Main considerations for the committee**

8. This report will now set out the comments made by the member of the public and respond to each one appropriately.

### **Comment 1:**

**As a council taxpayer in Warminster I am concerned that the investment in Warminster Sports Centre has not been properly considered and is a waste of taxpayers' money.**

9. The first thing considered in any investment decisions is what will achieve the most probable growth in physical activity participation across the whole population.
10. Experience, and data analysis combined indicate that gym memberships, which include options for swimming and group exercise, offer the best opportunities for growth.
11. £10.6M of capital funds are delegated to the Director of Leisure, Culture and Communities for adaptations that offer the best return on the above as approved by full council on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022.
12. To ensure decision making for monies spent (the public purse) is robust i.e. achieves the best possible growth and public health outcomes, a series of groups have been set up as consultees, each with terms of reference.
13. Project Group – involves the council's Capital Build and Leisure Operations teams in scoping the inception of leisure investment projects driven by potential growth.
14. Project Delivery Group – considers each project and their validity. Chaired by the Director of Leisure, Culture and Communities and attended by the Head of Service for Capital Build (and team), Head of Service Development, Head of Service Leisure Operations (and team), Communications. This team takes questions from the LCC Capital Projects Board.
15. Leisure, Culture and Communities (LCC) Capital Projects Board – act as final consultees for leisure investment pipeline projects. Consists of the Deputy CEO, Corporate Director for Place, Director of Public Health, Cabinet Member for Leisure, Libraries, Communities and Public Health, Head of Capital Projects, Head of Service Development.
16. A key consideration in determining how best to improve the membership base and improve financial sustainability, is the residual difference between the current fitness membership base and the latent fitness demand for each facility. Latent demand assesses the current desired demand for a service or activity, that is not fulfilled due to certain constraints. In the case of leisure services this is insufficient fitness provision. Use of latent demand data enables leisure providers to grow participation outcomes, commercial returns and social value, resulting in a data-driven return on investment and commercially sustainable facilities that reflect local need.

17. Table 1 below demonstrates the link between this market data prediction and the successes achieved in increased memberships in our centres that have received investment over the past ten years. Each site shows an increase in membership from initial opening in excess of predicted latent demand and following capital investment. This translates as increased revenue, improved health outcomes for residents and more individuals engaging in physical activity.

Facility	Date Opened	Membership at opening	Latent Demand	Current Membership
Springfield	Aug 14	791	1,114	1,662
5 Rivers -Salisbury	Nov 15	1,929	2,490	3,185
Nadder - Tisbury	Aug 16	138	383	447
The Vale - Pewsey	Oct 18	272	444	882
Calne	Nov 20	556	1,361	952
Melksham	Aug 22	499	1,895	2,293

18. Table 2 below illustrates latent demand and opportunities to increase fitness memberships at Wiltshire Council facilities which are yet to benefit from capital investment. The table shows the potential to nearly double memberships at Warminster Sports Centre with the right investment.

Facility	Membership position: 1 Jan 2024	Latent demand (2015)	Latent demand estimate (2022)	Difference from Jan 24 to Latent Demand
Trowbridge (CPLC / TSC)	1029	2925	3101	2072
Olympiad Leisure Centre	1054	2796	2964	1910
Bradford on Avon Pool	47	586	621	574
<b>Warminster Sports Centre</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>1013</b>	<b>477</b>
Devizes Leisure Centre	906	1268	1344	438
Durrington pool	171	558	591	420
The Activity Zone	581	923	978	397
LRC & Westbury Pool	456	804	852	396
Lime Kiln Leisure Centre	554	808	856	302
Tidworth Leisure Centre	627	870	922	295
Marlborough Leisure Centre	590	805	853	263
Amesbury Sports Centre	297	405	429	132

19. The figures above clearly show that Warminster has a need for investment to achieve its' latent demand potential.
20. Many years of commercial experience within the Leisure and Capital Build teams, and data obtained from previous investment projects, indicate that this is best achieved by upgrading and enlarging the fitness offering, as demonstrated in table 1.
21. Where data indicates the greatest need for investment, which provides the best outcomes relating to financial sustainability and increased participation in physical activity by upgrading and enlarging fitness provision, Leisure, Culture and Communities work alongside colleagues from the capital build team to develop suitable programmes of work that are within budget constraints.
22. Design work undertaken in relation to Warminster Sports Centre highlighted the most cost-effective means of improving the fitness offer would require relocating the fitness studio into the space currently used as squash courts. The work also

includes developing the existing fitness studio space as a secondary studio and community space and upgrading the current group exercise space. Relocating the fitness studio to the ground floor will improve access to those residents who have mobility issues and make the space more inclusive.

23. The 2023 Sport England Active Lives Survey highlights that participation in squash in England continues to decline and since the pandemic 10% of core regular squash players (playing twice a week) have not picked up their racket again.
24. The 2024 Sport England Active Lives Survey shows that, overall squash participation is in decline, experiencing an average annual decrease of -4.2% since 2016.
25. Table 3 below provides examples of the number of publicly operated squash courts in a selection of local authority areas and highlights the size of each population. Wiltshire Council provide significantly more squash courts than neighbouring authorities:

Local Authority	Courts	Population Approx 000s
S Gloucestershire	8	283
BANES	2	192
Swindon	2	234
Barnsley	1	245
Oldham	0	242
Wiltshire	24	510

26. Table 4 below shows the current usage of squash facilities across all Wiltshire Council sites between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. The table demonstrates that the one operational court at Warminster Sports Centre is vastly underused, and that better use could be made of this space to generate income and to benefit more individuals.

Facility	Courts	Bookings	Available Bookings	Occupancy	Rackets Members
Devizes	2	3,264	14,316	23%	23
Five Rivers - Salisbury	3	4,643	24,282	19%	133
Claredon - Trowbridge	2	1,557	13,536	11%	4
Leighton - Westbury	1	704	6,417	11%	1
Springfield - Corsham	2	1,329	14,550	9%	8
Activity Zone - Malmesbury	1	571	7,158	8%	2
Olympiad - Chippenham	3	1,693	22,527	8%	2
<b>Warminster</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>7,119</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>7</b>
Marlborough	1	472	6,768	7%	3
The Vale - Pewsey	1	370	6,885	5%	7
Amesbury	1	302	5,793	5%	3
Lime Kiln – Royal WB	1	359	7,392	5%	
Castle Place - Trowbridge	1	283	6,573	4%	3
Tidworth	4	1,010	26,448	4%	11

27. Table 5 below shows that the proportion of income generated by fitness in the 2023/24 leisure budget was 33%. At Warminster Sports Centre this was 29% of total site income. The total overall income generated in the 23/24 leisure budget is £15.524m. Of this, £5.135m was generated through fitness. Warminster Sports Centre’s fitness income was £197k. The proportion of overall income generated by squash in the 2023/24 leisure budget was 1% and this is the same at Warminster Sports Centre. The total squash income in the 2023/24 leisure budget was £130k and the total squash income was £4.7k at Warminster Sports Centre.

	Total	Fitness	Squash
All leisure sites Income 2023/24	£15.524m	£5.135m	£130K
Warminster Income 2023/24	£685,004K	£197K	£4.7K

28. Warminster Sports Centre has a membership of circa 809; the total number of racket members is 8, this equates to less than 1% of the total membership at the site.

29. Investment to expand and improve the fitness offer at Warminster Sports Centre has the potential to increase memberships by circa 500 on site. The average yield per member is circa £30. Once the full potential of the of the project is realised it has the potential to generate additional income of circa £180k per annum. This figure does not take in to account the additional social value realised through this investment including benefits relating to social care and the NHS.

30. The overall number of courts available at Wiltshire Council facilities will not be impacted by the Warminster investment project. Although one court will be displaced at Warminster Sports Centre, a second court will be made operational at Leighton Recreation Centre, ensuring that the number of locally available courts remains the same. Providing two operational courts at Leighton will enable local clubs to deliver competition squash.

**Comment 2:  
The proposal, which has been approved, is to invest £1 to £1.5 million to double the size of the gym by demolishing the two squash/racketball courts.**

31. There is only one functional court at Warminster Sports Centre. The amount of usage on the one functioning court, and the associated costs to bring the second court back into action, did not justify any investment in squash provision at the facility, particularly given the proximity of nearby squash provision at Leighton Recreation Centre. Rather than demolishing the existing structure, the

project will repurpose the space to provide an improved fitness offer. Once this is done there will be no provision for squash at Warminster Sports Centre.

**Comment 3:**

**An FOI request revealed that the justification for enlarging the gym hinges on a figure for "latent demand" leading to the assumption that doubling the size of the gym would double membership income. The latent demand figure was provided by Pulse Fitness, the company that would benefit from selling their gym equipment to the Sports Centre if the plan goes ahead.**

32. Latent demand is not an assumption but is calculated following a four-step process which includes identifying the catchment for a particular facility, understanding the population and demographics of those within the catchment and the mapping of other similar provision within the local area. This insight is then used to estimate the demand for a facility, utilising further insight from approximately 7,000 fitness facilities in the UK and their members.
33. Latent demand for Wiltshire Council facilities was not produced by Pulse Fitness, it was commissioned by Pulse Fitness from a company called the Leisure Database Company, who in turn use data from Experian, a multinational data analytics and consumer credit reporting company who provide data, analytics and technologies to support businesses to develop new opportunities.
34. As the table 1 above demonstrates, our latent demand calculations have been a good predictor thus far in providing the evidence for our fitness expansion projects.
35. The Director of the Leisure Database Company has offered to appear in front of scrutiny if required to take the committee through their workings.
36. There are 50+ years of commercial experience in the leisure team of delivering such projects, which have always delivered an increased financial return.
37. For robustness and transparency, Wiltshire Council commissioned a new report directly with the Leisure Database Company for an up-to-date Latent Demand figure for Warminster Sports Centre. The report was published on the 26/06/24 and stated latent demand had now risen to 1020.

**Comment 4:**

**There are already four other gyms in Warminster: Harridges, Bishopstrow, Snap Fitness and CrossFit (Crockerton). It would seem that the private sector has made adequate provision for gyms in the area and there is no evidence that the investment would draw users away from these other gyms. There are however, no other publicly available squash/racketball courts available in the town. The purpose of local government is, surely, to fill the gaps left by private enterprise rather than trying to go into competition.**

38. The table below shows the price points of the gyms noted. These facilities will be suitable for specific demographics within the local area, while Wiltshire Council's offer will be accessible to the general population with concession rates available to those groups who may otherwise be unable to access fitness facilities.

**Table 6: Price Points of Other Gyms in the Area:**

Facility	Pricing Policy	Description
Bishopstrow	Annual membership only - £1,250 plus a £175 joining fee.	High End spa facility
Harridges	£45 per calendar month	Gym and classes - target heavy lifting
SNAP (currently on the market for a sale)	£26.99 per month but must pay a full year of fees £323.88 at sign up no joining fee when using this option. Lowest monthly direct debit is £34.99 plus a £30 joining fee.	Gym and classes only – 24 hour model
Cross fit (Crockerton)	£70 per calendar month	Specialist Fitness Model
Wiltshire Council	Membership available from £24 per calendar month plus a £25 joining fee for all new joiners. The rate quoted is for Fitness Zone Membership (gym and swim) at the Concession rate. The council also has a range of P&P options which are made extremely inexpensive for vulnerable residents.	Gym, Swim and Classes – inclusive with a range of price points

39. The committee need to be aware that Snap Fitness is currently up for sale.
40. The investment in the council facility is not only to deliver greater numbers but also helps to safeguard against competition from these other gyms.
41. The other gyms are private sector and solely focus on profit margins, not the delivery of public health outcomes.
42. The council gym must be competitive to remain in existence but also delivers on other social objectives that the private sector does not, i.e. Active Health, Inclusive Equipment, Adapted Price Points to ensure the vulnerable are accommodated.
43. There is one other publicly available squash court in Warminster at the Warminster School, although it has limited accessibility.
44. There is one public court at Leighton Recreation Centre only a few miles away from Warminster. As part of this work, it is our intention to make a second court available at Leighton.

**Comment 5:**

**Warminster residents and users of the Sports Centre have not been consulted on the plan, neither have the Town Council or Kingdown School, which has 1,600 pupils and is located next door.**

45. In accordance with the timescales and evidence review the proposed plans were taken to the Warminster Area Board on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024, where plans were well received.
46. There is no legal requirement to consult on the types of proposed changes and there is no statutory or common law duty to consult on these changes. The common law duty arises where, for example, the council makes a promise to consult, or the council has consulted on previous similar cases or for other reasons of fairness. There has been no promise in this instance, and we have not done so on previous similar investment projects. The council may also



decide to consult where officers are not satisfied all the relevant factors are known, but this is not the case here as the decision has been made based on the relevant data and in compliance with relevant policy and procedures.

47. The Warminster Centre Manager has met with the Head of PE of the school to agree operational requirements during the term of the project, so the school are fully informed and engaged in the project.
48. In addition, the Warminster Centre Manager had a conversation with the Head of PE in September 2023 when a school development was announced. The building works will take place in 2025 and will have a small studio mainly for drama, an additional changing room and a small gymnasium area. These facilities will not be available to the public.
49. The role of local government is very broad, particularly in a large unitary authority such as Wiltshire, and its role is to maximise the opportunities for health and wellbeing to as many people as possible.

#### **Comment 6.**

**The goal of making the gym more accessible to disabled people could be achieved by installing a lift, but this has been dismissed out of hand with no costings undertaken. Extending the existing gym across the roof has also been dismissed in a similar manner.**

50. There is already access to the first floor by way of a seated lift via the stairs. Placing the fitness suite on the ground floor will facilitate better access to more people, particularly those with limited mobility. This will enable leisure to provide an enhanced Active Health programme and encourage greater use. Building over a flat roof would cost significantly more to deliver. Assuming it was even feasible to deliver this, additional floor loading, infrastructure for the gym and additional costs for the lift would be required and this would negate the financial aspects of the business case. The council must ensure value for money in delivering projects of this type. This will include minimising infrastructure changes and maximising participation to match maximise the value of the investment.

#### **Comment 7.**

**The two squash/racketball courts at Warminster are of the expensive, competition-grade glass backed type. Glass backed courts allow competitions to take place and allow coaching to be undertaken with one coach between two courts. They also provide a more amenable and social experience for players. At a meeting at the Sports Centre David Redfern asked "what is so special about glass backed courts?" indicating that the Council is not aware that the plan involves destroying a premium asset.**

51. Courts are categorised as:
  - a. Hardback, without viewing
  - b. Hard back with viewing
  - c. Hard back with glass door
  - d. Glassed back
  - e. Full Perspex court

All courts can be used for most activities including coaching, competitions and recreational play. Higher level competitions do require a viewing area to enable Marking and Refereeing, however this does not require glassed backed courts as it is recognised that a viewing balcony is sufficient. County leagues and national competitions use a combination of available courts for this type of activity.

England Squash qualified coaches have the skills to coach on all court types, these skills are evaluated during their qualification exams.

A glassed back court is a bonus for social activity, which can be facilitated in viewing galleries or elsewhere when required.

#### **Comment 8.**

**Only one court has been available for use in recent years, which makes club nights difficult and competitions impossible. Councillor Tony Jackson has made excellent progress with the PE department at Kingdown School to enable squash coaching for pupils, but this can only proceed with two courts available. The second court could be refurbished for a tiny fraction of the proposed £1 to £1.5 million expenditure.**

52. The new gym will provide opportunities for the children of the school that squash courts are not able to, and our data and evidence on children's fitness memberships, circa 3,000 across the county, would corroborate this.
53. The second court could be made available for a smaller proportion of the project expected spend, but the usage on it, and the cost, is very likely to not justify the spend based on all current intelligence as outlined above.

#### **Comment 9.**

**David Redfern has stated that activities at the Sports Centre are actively promoted with the exception of squash and racketball. There is no signage at the Centre to indicate the presence of squash courts. A poster for a squash club in the reception area was moved to the squash courts where it is only seen by people using the courts. The squash courts are not listed on RacketPal, an app that connects players. It also appears that the Council have not accounted for the expected upsurge in squash due to its inclusion in the 2028 Olympics.**

54. The comment made in full as per the above was that with limited marketing and promotional capacity, and spend, the leisure service focuses on those areas that they know have best chance of return.
55. Despite the regular decline of squash over several decades Wiltshire is committed to safeguarding minority sports where the evidence is supportive.
56. Wiltshire will develop a built facilities plan that will address the provision of squash as part of its' ongoing drive towards achieving the greatest physical activity participation statistics.

**Comment 10:**

**Shortly before the closure of the squash courts was announced, the Sports Centre created a "RacketZone" membership which allowed free use of courts for a monthly fee. Insufficient time was allowed for the effect of this membership to be assessed. No consideration has been given to trialling the inclusion of free or heavily discounted use of squash courts in other membership plans.**

57. The introduction of the Racketzone membership at Warminster Sports Centre was in December 2023 and this was in line with several other facilities. A membership had been trialled at Five Rivers in the first instance and was introduced at other facilities periodically over the following 18 months.
58. In the last 7 months, 8 Racketzone memberships have been sold at Warminster Sports Centre.
59. A rackets add on membership was piloted at Five Rivers to address a specific issue, this option is available at a premium rate. The Racketzone membership was introduced which offers a good value option for badminton and squash players as a result there is no reason to add further discounted use.

**Comment 11:**

**In summary, given that the plan involves the expenditure of up to £1.5 million and the demolition of a valuable asset, I ask the committee to scrutinise whether sufficient evidence has been gathered from stakeholders and whether due consideration has been given to alternatives. In your deliberations, it seems reasonable that the evidence for latent demand be dismissed, given that it was generated by Pulse Fitness, a company that would benefit from the plan.**

60. Committee is asked to consider the full response provided in this report when scrutinising our high-level strategy for leisure and the responses to the member of the public.