

Public Consultation on Stone Leisure Strategy

Westbridge Park - Stone

Leisure Facilities Strategy

July 2012

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Scope of the Report

This strategy creates a vision for sport and leisure provision in Stone over the next 20 years. It complements the emerging Stafford Borough local plan (The Plan for Stafford Borough), and looks in particular at Westbridge Park, where the Borough Council currently has its prime sport and leisure facilities for the town. There are 3 key service areas:

- Indoor leisure provision in Westbridge Park, with further shared facilities at Alleyne's School, Stone
- Outdoor sports provision – with particular emphasis on the two football pitches at Westbridge Park and a further pitch at Tilling Drive, Stone
- Children's Play and Youth provision in the Park and surrounding catchment area of Stone.

Background

Westbridge Park is sited adjacent to Stone Town Centre and benefits from a unique canal and riverside location. The Park contains a wide range of indoor and outdoor leisure facilities including:

- Toddlers and Junior play areas
- Wheeled sports park
- Tennis courts
- Grass football pitches
- Scout and Guide huts
- Stafford and Stone Canoe Club
- Health and Fitness facility
- Open space used for events, passive and active recreation and informal recreation.

The Plan for Stafford Borough - Strategic Policy Choices consultation document (June 2012) proposes 500 new homes per year across Stafford Borough, with 8% (40 per annum) of these being in Stone. Over the duration of the plan period, 2012 – 2031, an estimated 760 new dwellings could be developed in the town. Existing planning permissions for 300 of those houses already exists. In addition, surrounding settlements, such as Yarnfield, will also be attracting housing development, which adds to the catchment for Stone's leisure and sporting facilities.

This highlights the future growth of Stone and, if considered within the wider catchment areas that leisure would operate within, this will lead to a greater demand on sport and leisure facilities.

Indoor Leisure Provision

Overview

The current situation in Stone with regard to indoor sporting and leisure provision is that the facilities are centred upon two sites – Westbridge Park and Alleyne's Sports Centre. The facilities at Alleyne's Sports Centre are operated under the terms of a formal Joint Management Agreement between Alleyne's School and the Borough Council with the school having access during the day in term time and the community using the facilities in the evenings, weekends and holiday times.

The sports facilities at Alleyne's broadly consist of:

- Swimming pool, spectator area and wet-side changing accommodation
- Sports hall and dry-side changing accommodation
- Floodlit synthetic playing pitch
- Coach Education Centre
- Squash courts
- Grass playing pitches
- Tennis courts.

The revenue costs which accrue from the day-to-day operation of the Centre are broadly split along the basis of usage hours, with the Council covering the full staffing costs and retaining all revenue from community use.

The facility at Westbridge Park is managed and operated by the Borough Council and was originally constructed in 1989 as a Sports Hall (SASH), with a life expectancy of around 12 years. In 2005, the Council took a decision to refurbish and transform the facility into a purpose built fitness gym, containing in excess of 60 pieces of cardio and resistance equipment, together with a state of the art aerobic studio. This decision has proved to be very successful with a current membership of around 1,000 and fitness class attendances exceeding expectations.

During the same period the Council, in partnership with the Alleyne's School, embarked upon a series of successful bids for external funding designed to refurbish and upgrade some of the sports facilities at Alleyne's Sports Centre notably the provision of a new floodlit, synthetic pitch, Coach Education Centre, and refurbishment of the existing Sports Hall. In the interest of promoting more economic and effective management, consideration was given at the time to relocating the fitness facilities from Westbridge Park to Alleyne's to consolidate the overall management at one centre but, due to planning, operational, and financial restrictions, this did not prove to be practical.

The customer base at both facilities has increased significantly as the town has developed, and attendance levels at the Council's indoor leisure facilities in Stone are as set out below:

Alleyne's	Total No of Swims	27,633
Alleyne's	Total No of Other Users	72,433
Alleyne's	%age Occupancy Squash Courts	55%
Alleyne's	%age Occupancy Sports Hall	90%
Alleyne's	%age Occupancy Synthetic Pitch	53%
Westbridge Park	Fitness Class Attendances	18,768
Westbridge Park	Total No of Other Users	68,097
Westbridge Park	No of Momentum Gym Members	975

The Sports and Recreation Facilities Strategy, undertaken for the Council in 2009, highlighted the need to consider consolidating the management of the centres onto one site where practical. Redevelopment of facilities at Westbridge Park would offer an ideal opportunity to provide an optimum mix of sports facilities within the overall constraints of the site.

Taking into account the condition of the existing facilities at Alleyne's and the current school and community programming, it is considered that an optimum position would be for some of the key elements of the sports facilities at Alleyne's to be relocated into a new, purpose-built facility at Westbridge Park, and to replace the obsolete sports hall building which currently houses the fitness facilities. Should it be feasible to build a new sports facility at Westbridge Park then the footprint should be large enough to contain the following facilities:

- A 6-lane, 25m x 16m swimming pool (with a 12.5m x 8m training pool if possible)
- Fitness gym to accommodate up to 80 pieces of cardio vascular and resistance equipment incorporating an appropriate "health and wellbeing" system
- 3 multi-purpose rooms to be used as Aerobic studios
- Consultation/Training room
- Village changing accommodation
- Reception, catering, storage and administrative offices
- Main Hall – desirable, but not essential.

Following discussions with representatives from the A.S.A., a leading fitness company, Sport England, and the Council's current equipment provider, the estimated optimum size of the accommodation would need to include for:

Swimming pool hall (to include storage)	44 x 28m
Pool plant room	228m ²
Fitness gymnasium	600m ²
Aerobic room 1	170m ²
Aerobic room 2	110m ²
Aerobic room 3	110m ²
Plant room (gym building)	228m ²
Reception/catering/lobby area	520m ²
Changing village	490m ²
Admin/Managers office	90m ²
Training suite	50m ²
Staff room	30m ²
Cleaning store	18m ²
Main Hall (if included) 33x 18 x7.6m (4 court hall)	594m ²

The P.P.G.17 Assessment concluded that there will be a need for more swimming pool provision in the Borough as the population increases, with the greatest need likely to be in the Stafford Town area. The above proposal not only provides for a modern replacement of the existing facility at Alleyne's but would include a training pool which will enable the Council to continue to expand its highly successful training programmes for youngsters and provide additional water space to mitigate against future population growth in the Stone area.

With regard to sports hall provision within the Borough, the Assessment concluded that the Borough appeared to have an adequate supply of indoor sports halls at present. As communities grow in rural areas, such as Gnosall, shortfalls in sports hall space would develop but this could be accommodated through community use of school halls. An additional sports hall could be considered if long term community use of Alleyne's main hall does not prove to be the best overall option for the town going forward.

The Supply-Demand comparison for the level of Fitness provision indicated that there was a perceived shortfall of some 40 items of equipment across the Borough. On this basis it is suggested that the opportunity should be taken to consider increasing the level of provision at Westbridge Park to around 80 items.

The overall assessment is based on the presumption that the current sports hall, floodlit synthetic pitch, squash courts, coach education centre, and grass playing pitches remain at Alleyne's. Clearly the school will continue to require these facilities for their existing curriculum programmes during the term time, with the current programme of community use being maintained outside school hours.

Management could continue to be carried out by the Borough Council under the terms of a revised formal agreement, by an independent contractor, or directly by the school.

Access to the proposed new wet side facilities at Westbridge Park by local schools would be made available on a broadly similar basis to the administrative arrangements currently in operation at Stafford Leisure Centre for schools in the Stafford catchment area.

Outdoor Sports Provision

Football

The pitches at Westbridge Park are in poor condition as they are also extensively used for special events such as the Stone Festival and Stone Food and Drink Festival. In addition, the pitches are not supported by dedicated changing accommodation. As a direct result, one of the two pitches has been out of use for two seasons and it is highly unlikely that it will be feasible to maintain this area of the field as a playing pitch in the foreseeable future.

The P.P.G.17 Assessment undertaken by the Council in 2009 clearly highlights that there is a deficit of high quality playing pitches in the Stone area, and advocates the drafting and implementation of a long term master plan for the development of sporting and leisure facilities within Westbridge Park.

Crucially, the Assessment suggests the rationalisation of grass playing pitches onto a smaller number of multi-pitch sites with improved playing characteristics and supporting infrastructure, i.e. changing room accommodation. This would provide better playing facilities for players, support the development of community clubs (a key element in the Staffordshire Football Association's Strategy) and reduce the revenue costs associated with playing pitch maintenance.

Alongside this, the Assessment supports the Staffordshire Football Association's strategic view that Council's should seek to provide a network of floodlit, synthetic playing pitches (particularly 3RD Generation surfaces) across the Borough and progressively increase the extent to which football is played on artificial surfaces for both junior and adult clubs and for coaching and development programmes.

Currently, the Council's stock of grass football pitches within the Stone area is focused predominantly at:

- Westbridge Park
- Tilling Drive
- Walton Common

A practical strategy would be to:

- centralise the Council's stock of football pitches by extending and improving the site at Walton Common (or any other suitable alternative site) to accommodate replacement pitches from Westbridge Park and

Tilling Drive and to provide improved changing accommodation and car parking at the site.

- Seek to improve the drainage of the existing football pitches at the neighbouring Pirehill and Walton Priory schools and enter into formal agreements for community use of these pitches at weekends
- Contribute to the provision of a new 3rd Generation surface at the existing floodlit, synthetic pitch at Alleyne's school which the Council currently manages under terms of a formal management agreement.
- Set aside an area of open space at Westbridge Park specifically designed to accommodate the programme of community events.

In addition to the issues that Sport England would potentially identify, the above would also meet the aspirations set out in the Staffordshire and National Football Associations' Facilities Development Strategies.

If a preference for direct replacement pitches were to be considered, then negotiations with the owner of adjacent farmland would be necessary to identify any pockets of land which could be acquired and used to develop a further 2/3 pitches and to undertake any necessary work to bring the pitches up to standard, together with any supporting infrastructure, i.e. changing accommodation and car parking.

Initial discussions with the local schools regarding community use of their football pitches at weekends were initiated some time ago and received a positive response at that time. Further enquiries will need to be made to establish whether or not this scheme remains practical and viable.

The provision of a replacement 3G synthetic surface at Alleyne's Sports Centre will enable local football clubs to be able to play competitive matches on the pitch and to enable one of the most senior and established clubs in the area - Stone Alleynians – to return to the Town to play. Currently, the surface at Alleyne's synthetic pitch is sand dressed, which is more appropriate for hockey and football training and is consequently only used at 53% capacity.

A broadly similar facility for hockey is already available at nearby Stone Hockey Club's ground at Enson Lane, so the provision of a replacement 3G carpet at Alleyne's would go some way to increasing usage levels and providing an overall strategic improvement to playing facilities in Stone.

Tennis Courts

The current tennis court provision in Westbridge Park is in poor condition and consequently attracts very little usage. It is suggested that these courts are not replaced under this strategy as the recent provision of modern, synthetic surfaced courts at nearby Stonefield Park offers a much higher quality facility. Upgrading the playing surface at Alleyne's should also be considered, as it is in urgent need of resurfacing.

Children's Play and Youth Provision

Westbridge Park has traditionally incorporated three separate play facilities:

- Toddler play area – broadly targeting children up to the age of 5 years
- Junior play area – broadly targeting children in the 6-12 year range
- Wheeled sport facility – targeted at older children.

The existing equipment at the site is now nearing the end of its useful life. The toddler equipment was removed from the site in 2009 following concerns related to the structural integrity of the equipment, leaving little or no equipment for children in the youngest age category or with special needs.

Most of the youth provision for teenagers in Westbridge Park is very limited offering little in the way of play value. There is a clear need for a significant improvement in the quantity and quality of teenage provision throughout the catchment area of Stone.

The Council recently undertook a formal assessment of the play provision for children and young people as part of the P.P.G.17 Strategy. The outcome highlighted the need to plan and progressively develop a strategic network of large and well-equipped play areas in the Borough, preferably on high profile sites. The Strategy specifically identifies Westbridge Park for enhancement.

Long term benefits of this approach are that it will raise the profile of Westbridge Park, generate economies of scale with regard to maintenance, and provide suitable facilities for teenagers so minimising misuse, vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Creating a dedicated space and range of modern accessible recreational facilities for young people in the Park will help to fulfil the Council's obligations under the terms of Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act. This principle was adopted as a centrepiece for the concept of developing play facilities in Victoria Park, Stafford, which reopened in May 2011 and has proved to be very successful and hugely popular.

The provision of a "Destination Park" facility at Westbridge Park with a range of both formal and informal play provision catering for all ages would form an integral part of a successful park environment, provide high quality play facilities for the catchment area of Stone and enable the Council to make efficient and effective use of revenue resources through rationalising play provision in neighbouring areas of Stone.

Westbridge Park already represents the Council's flagship recreational facility in Stone and acts as a focal point for active and passive, formal and informal recreation, particularly in view of the fact that the Park is situated less than 200 metres from the southern end of the Stone Town high street.

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