

Cabinet Members Report to Council

24th September 2022

Councillor – Cabinet Member for Business and Deputy Leader

Report to Council for the period to September 2026
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1 Progress on Portfolio Matters
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I hope members will indulge me if this report is fuller than usual. The reason is simple: the work now underway across leisure, health, physical activity, culture, community outreach and major facilities is not just about individual projects. Taken together, it is about reducing health inequalities, widening access, improving quality of life and strengthening West Norfolk as a place.

I make no apology for that, because I believe the work we are doing around leisure, health and physical activity is about far more than individual facilities or sporting projects. Taken together, our plans for the swimming pool, padel and racket sports, wider Leisure and partnership developments and our wider community activity have the potential to make a real difference to health inequalities, deprivation, inclusion and the quality of life of people across West Norfolk.

For that reason, I wanted to set out not only what we are doing, but why I believe it matters so much.

This report therefore focuses on four connected themes: the changing role of leisure and culture as a community service; the case for investing in modern, inclusive facilities at Lynnsport; the need to balance commercial success with targeted social value; and the importance of ensuring that rural communities benefit from the same ambition as King's Lynn.

Leisure

I want to use this report to highlight the increasingly important role that our leisure and cultural services play in the lives of our residents, and to set out why the investment we are now considering in our facilities should be seen as much more than investment in sport.

It is investment in health.

It is investment in children and families.

It is investment in tackling deprivation and inequality.

It is investment in inclusion.

And it is investment in West Norfolk as a place.

Our Corporate Strategy is clear that our ambition is to establish West Norfolk as a place where communities can thrive, and that includes supporting the health and wellbeing of our residents and improving access to leisure, cultural and community experiences.

I believe our leisure programme is becoming one of the clearest practical demonstrations of that ambition.

From leisure service to community service

Since bringing Leisure and Culture back in house, the service has increasingly moved away from the traditional model that a council leisure service simply operates swimming pools, gyms and sports halls.

Of course those facilities remain vitally important. But what is now being created is a much broader public service based around health, prevention, physical activity, learning, inclusion and community connection.

The latest Leisure and Culture Impact Report demonstrates that change very clearly.

During the year our Active Wellbeing Service supported more than 1,400 residents through programmes involving 35 health referral partners, including the NHS, the Integrated Care Board and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

Our teams have worked with more than 40 West Norfolk schools, delivering 1,475 PE lessons and extracurricular activities and generating approximately 41,000 engagements with children and young people.

Our Active Community programme recorded around 17,000 attendances across almost 1,700 sessions delivered at 23 community venues.

These are not simply sessions within our leisure centres. They take place in village halls, community centres, churches, parks, streets and other locations where people already live their lives.

Our holiday programmes generated more than 30,000 attendances, including 6,318 holiday club places with free meals and around 24,000 attendances at heavily subsidised activities costing as little as 50p or £1.

We have also secured approximately £340,000 of external funding from government and partner organisations to help us provide activity, wellbeing and community programmes that people might otherwise have been unable to afford. Those numbers matter because they illustrate a fundamental point.

Our leisure service is increasingly going to the community rather than simply waiting for the community to come to us.

Tackling deprivation through activity

That approach becomes particularly important when we consider the health inequalities that exist within West Norfolk.

Around 29,000 residents of King's Lynn and West Norfolk live in neighbourhoods amongst the 20 per cent most deprived in England, with around 9,000 living in the most deprived 10 per cent.

There are also stark differences in life expectancy between communities in our borough.

Those differences should trouble every one of us.

They demonstrate that where somebody is born and grows up can still have a profound effect upon their chances of living a long and healthy life.

Our status as a Marmot Place therefore needs to be much more than a badge. It must be reflected in practical action which addresses the wider determinants of health and systematically reduces avoidable inequalities.

Physical activity is part of that work. So is social connection. So is giving children positive experiences and healthy habits early in life. So is providing opportunities that people can actually afford.

And so is creating facilities which are welcoming to somebody who may never previously have thought that sport or a leisure centre was for them. That is why programmes such as Play Street, Active Families, community fitness, walking sport, women's only activity, disability sport, low cost holiday activities and our work within schools are every bit as important as conventional memberships.

There will always be people for whom even our lowest commercial price is unaffordable.

Our challenge is therefore not simply to reduce prices. It is to use targeted interventions, external funding and spare capacity intelligently so that financial circumstances do not exclude children or adults from opportunities which could genuinely improve their health and their lives.

The next generation of Lynnsport

Against that background, the plans now developing at Lynnsport are particularly significant.

We have the opportunity to create something much bigger than a collection of individual sports facilities.

We can create a destination for health, activity and inclusion.

A new Aquatic centre

St James' Swimming Pool opened in 1975. It is approaching the end of its economic life, is increasingly expensive and inefficient to operate and its six lane pool restricts both participation and competition.

Following extensive work and public engagement, the council is now considering development of a standalone new swimming centre at Lynnsport.

The emerging proposal includes an eight lane 25 metre main pool, a four lane 17 metre learner pool with a moveable floor and a splash pad.

These features are not luxuries.

The moveable floor allows the water environment to be adapted to different users. It can support children learning to swim, older people, rehabilitation programmes and people with disabilities.

The proposed wheelchair access platform is equally important.

The splash pad can introduce young children and families to water in an environment which feels less intimidating than a conventional swimming pool.

Our existing Good Boost programme and Hydrohex programme already demonstrates how water-based exercise can support older people and those living with pain, limited mobility or long-term conditions.

A purpose designed modern facility gives us the opportunity to develop this work much further.

People in West Norfolk have waited a very long time for a swimming facility of which they can genuinely be proud.

Our ambition should not be simply to replace one pool with another.

It should be to create a facility fit for the next generation.

Padel, tennis and community sport

Alongside this sits the West Norfolk Racket and Community Sports Hub. The proposal would provide covered tennis, padel and flexible multi use facilities. Padel is one of the fastest growing participation sports internationally and has enormous potential because it is social, relatively easy for beginners to access and suitable across a very broad range of ages and abilities.

At present, King's Lynn has no covered tennis or padel provision of this kind. That creates both an opportunity and a responsibility.

We should certainly create commercially successful facilities that people are prepared to pay to use.

But success should also be measured by who we manage to introduce health interventions and opportunities who would never otherwise have had the opportunity.

I want us to explore how unused or quieter court capacity, alongside community assets such as multi-use games areas, parks and community spaces, can be used with schools, community organisations and families from areas of deprivation so that health and wellbeing initiatives do not become activities available only to those who can comfortably afford them.

That is how commercial success and social value can work together rather than compete with one another.

Sport and activity for everyone, removing barriers

Perhaps the element about which I feel most strongly is our ambition for disability and adapted sport.

Planning permission has been secured for the Adapted Sports Hub, which will be delivered by the charity ASH.

The ASH charity aims to create a specialist, fully accessible facility offering adapted sports, training, community activity and coach development in partnership with other organisations.

As a leisure and culture service, we already have a growing foundation on which to build, and this work can complement it.

Our disability sport programme now includes Ability Counts football, wheelchair rugby and multi sport activity.

The wheelchair rugby programme has developed into the Black Knights, who now compete inter regionally.

We support disability swimming, deaf swimming and the Ride United disability cycling programme.

Our ambition is that Lynnsport should ultimately become recognised well beyond West Norfolk as a centre of excellence for adapted and inclusive sport.

We want a place where a child with a disability can discover a sport for the first time. A place where somebody recovering from illness or injury can rebuild their confidence. A place where a disabled athlete can train seriously and compete. And a place where disabled and non disabled people participate alongside each other so naturally that inclusion ceases to be something we have to talk about. Using our Leisure and Culture service as a delivery arm for this work gives us the opportunity to make that ambition real.

The rural challenge

There is, however, an important challenge we should acknowledge.

Much of this investment is centred on King's Lynn, and residents living in our more rural communities may reasonably ask what it means for them.

That is a fair question and one we should address directly.

Our outreach programmes already take activity into village halls, schools, parks and community venues across the borough, and that work must continue to expand.

That means the debate about leisure cannot be separated from the debate about rural connectivity.

Together with our outreach programmes, as a Borough our focus should be on optimising our community assets we have, including our valuable village halls.

Our ambition should therefore be twofold.

We must continue taking activity directly into rural communities wherever possible. But we should also work towards a West Norfolk where living in a village does not prevent somebody from accessing the first-class facilities we are creating.

The success of our Leisure portfolio should ultimately be measured not only by how many people in the borough use facilities, but by how accessible our programmes are to residents from across the whole of West Norfolk.

Economic growth and place

There is another dimension to investment in Leisure and Culture.

High quality leisure, cultural and recreational facilities contribute to the attractiveness of a place. They help businesses recruit and retain employees. They make areas more attractive to families considering where to live. They create jobs and training opportunities. They generate visits and expenditure. They support events. And they contribute to civic pride. Our Economic Strategy is concerned with economic growth for our businesses, our people and our places, and healthy, inclusive communities are an important part of that ambition.

Investment in leisure therefore sits comfortably alongside our ambitions for regeneration, skills, tourism and economic development. Evidence shows that every £1 invested in leisure can generate more than £4 in economic return.

A successful leisure and culture portfolio can increasingly become part of how we promote King's Lynn and West Norfolk as a place to live, work and visit.

Responsible investment

None of this means that we should disregard affordability. Quite the opposite. Major capital schemes must be financially sustainable and business cases must withstand scrutiny.

But our assessment of value must also be sophisticated enough to recognise the wider return generated by public leisure: preventing inactivity, supporting recovery from illness, reducing social isolation, giving children from deprived households somewhere positive to go, helping older residents remain mobile and independent, and enabling disabled people to participate in sport.

Creating confidence, friendships and community connections has value. Not all of that value appears on the leisure service's income line. That is why I welcome the work to measure the social value generated by our investment using recognised methodologies and to incorporate those outcomes into our future performance measures, as reflected in the 26/27 corporate KPIs.

Conclusion

Our moving communities data shows a service that is already changing lives.

The next stage is to give that service the infrastructure to match our ambition. Our Leisure developments should not be viewed in isolation.

Together, these developments can form the heart of a new approach to leisure in West Norfolk: excellent facilities supported by community outreach; commercial activity aligned with social value; elite sport sitting alongside first-time participation; physical activity linked to preventative healthcare; urban investment balanced with rural accessibility; and investment in buildings matched by investment in people.

We often talk about tackling deprivation, improving health inequalities and enhancing our place. This programme gives us the opportunity to actually do it. I want every child in West Norfolk, irrespective of their parents' income or their postcode, to have the opportunity to be active.

We want disability never to be the reason somebody cannot participate. We want our older residents to have opportunities to remain active, independent and connected. We want residents in our rural communities to be able to access the same opportunities as those who live close to our major facilities. And we want West Norfolk to have sporting facilities which residents are proud of and which people from outside our borough want to visit.

Our residents deserve the best.

If we combine ambitious investment with the outstanding community work already being delivered by our teams, align it with the NHS plan for localised care and connect it to the council's wider statutory services, I believe we have an opportunity to create something genuinely exceptional.

Not simply better leisure facilities.

A healthier, more inclusive, better connected and more confident West Norfolk.