



# Future Use of St Crispin's Leisure Centre

## Outline Business Case

**Primary strategic purpose/Criteria for change and commitments supported.**  
*(select relevant strategic priorities)*

- Enriching Lives
- Providing Safe & Strong Communities
- Enjoying a clean and green borough
- Delivering the right homes in the right places
- Keeping the borough moving
- Changing the way, we work for you
- Being the best, we can be

**Date of document**  
**Sign off Date from Leadership Team**  
**Sign off from CLT (if applicable)**

22/11/2023  
Click or tap to enter a date.  
Click or tap to enter a date.

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## 1 Introduction

There has been corporate focus on strengthening the understanding of current and future school place needs and demand, to ensure we can plan, design and deliver the best outcomes for children within the borough. Also, WBC has undertaken an assessment of the usage of St Crispin's Leisure Centre in Wokingham which has been declining since the opening of the Carnival Hub Leisure Centre in July 2022. Following public consultation, there is a proposal that future use of this asset should transfer to The Circle Trust to facilitate future expansion of St Crispin's School and help address the significant deficit in secondary school places in the borough whilst maintaining community use as fully as possible. The council's Executive will take the final decision on the way forward, informed by the outcomes of the public consultation and other information and data including the shortfall in secondary school places and the patronage of the current leisure centre.

## 2 Need for Change

**School places deficit:** WBC's current school place sufficiency forecast highlights that there is limited capacity to meet the council's statutory duty in relation to secondary school places. In the academic year 23/24, 49 pupils had 'no offer' at Year 7 and WBC was one of only 13 Local Education Authorities nationally with this issue. The Council has a legal duty to provide sufficient school places. School place sufficiency forecasting for Wokingham indicates that the Borough has a total shortage of 1,045<sup>1</sup> Year 7 places at secondary schools over the next five academic years. This forecast has been verified by an independent specialist.

As the local authority, Wokingham Borough Council has a statutory duty to provide school places for every child resident in the Borough whose parents want one. A school place MUST be provided, if needs be by such options as sending children to the nearest out of borough schools with places or by providing additional classrooms. Both those options would involve significant additional costs, as well as being worse for the education and welfare of the children concerned.

As the community expands, the council's strategic approach to school place planning is addressing deficits in provision across the borough in conjunction with other schools best placed to provide the most cost-effective solutions. Including investments already made in Piggott, Bohunt, Forest and Emmbrook schools. St Crispin's School is best placed to support the education of more young people in this area and provides WBC with circa 330 much needed Y7 school places. Based on the current roll and birthrate projection in Wokingham, the council expects the population to continue to expand beyond 200k by 2031 because of new house builds and inward migration. Therefore, the long-term strategy must meet this demand requiring the necessary investment in the schools' expansion infrastructure.

**Impact on capital investment:** Over the next five years, the Council has forecasted circa £25m for capital investments in secondary school expansion programmes in partnership with Academy Trusts in the Borough as part of the long-term strategy. Therefore, to meet the Council's statutory obligations and manage the financial pressures associated with the investment necessary to do so, it is prudent WBC explore avenues to work in partnership with Academy Trusts to address the shortage in secondary school places and get the best value for money.

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<sup>1</sup> People Too School Place Model

### 3 Justification for the site transfer to St Crispin’s School

The St. Crispin’s Leisure Centre site is circa 1.32 acres, adjacent to the St Crispin’s secondary School. If this was realisable as residential value, it would be worth circa £1.5m, however its proximity to the school and planning constraints means that commercial use or scope for residential development is limited. As such, its value is likely to be community use only.

The secondary school needs capital investment to provide the space required to safely manage the rising number of pupil places. It is critical to invest in the borough’s local secondary school provision to ensure parents and carers can access their school of choice wherever possible.

The council also has an obligation to ensure young people are safe. Due to the communal car park and access arrangements, there have been site security and safeguarding challenges which the Circle Trust have raised with the council. Furthermore, as the school community expands, there is a significant risk of overcrowding at the school which the council must support the school to address. This option presents an opportunity to address these obligations.

**Meet council priorities:** This option also delivers against the Council’s statutory duty to provide adequate secondary school places. Without the leisure centre to create additional classrooms, St Crispin’s School cannot take an additional 55 students in September 2024 nor an additional 55 students in September 2025 and thereafter. The option of transferring the asset to St Crispin’s school represents value for money compared to providing extra module or new build classroom. To expand St Crispin’s school to meet the extra school places WBC needs by adding a modular build for example, would cost circa £5m-£6m. DfE and Building Regs requires Modular or new Build and therefore Portacabins are no longer an option.

In addition, as St. Crispin’s is a Grade II listed building, the only alternative option would be to build on the existing playing fields. Sport England have declared that they would not support any further encroachment on to playing fields and so this is not a viable option. This in turn limits the school’s expansion at the back of the site for additional prefabricated classrooms.

Should WBC instead invest at another school site elsewhere in the Borough, this will cost at a minimum £5m - £6m for the same size modular building, plus potentially an additional £1m-£2m for infrastructure and utilities.

**Mitigates safeguarding risks within St. Crispin’s school:** Safeguarding is a fundamental responsibility of a council and therefore WBC must take all reasonable steps to mitigate that risk. From a recent security survey completed by St Crispin’s School, the school would need a perimeter fence to defend the school site from intruders and this can best be achieved if it had control of the whole site. These concerns have been raised by the Circle Trust in their consultation response.

**Value for money:** A key consideration has been ensuring that we also bring value for money in any investment WBC commits to. Transferring the site to St. Crispin’s school would require a £1m contribution towards site improvements which is considerably less than investing £5-£6m that would be required for a modular building extension in the school.

### 4 Risks and mitigation

WBC have identified the risks associated with this proposal but have assessed that the mitigations are adequately robust.

Key risk	Risk mitigation
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The loss of the community facility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Circle Trust have committed to support existing community/voluntary groups using the facility as well as the Squash league.</li> <li>• The Circle Trust will continue to provide wraparound care model and holiday club offer for parents and carers within the local community.</li> <li>• Places for Leisure will incorporate all other sports classes and activities except Squash in their other sites.</li> <li>• Places for Leisure have also agreed to support continuing voluntary groups in any of their other sites if this is required</li> <li>• Places for Leisure will support the opening of Montague Park community centre in the future</li> <li>• Places for Leisure will support alternative provision for some of the exercise/aerobic classes including at BXG FIT in Peach Place, a site they already operate on behalf of the council</li> </ul>
Fluctuation in school place demand over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council’s strategic school place planning is based on a five-year projection. This is reviewed every year as migration and population need changes. Should the current rate of growth change so that growth ceases or diminishes future works packages will be adjusted or omitted to reflect school needs in these new circumstances.</li> </ul>
Concern of the length of a lease term vs five-year schools need demand profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lease term is a separate matter based on the legislative framework for how councils give Academy Trusts land to operate schools. 125 years is the DfE’s national standard lease period for an academy. The school places are agreed based on the Collaboration Agreement contract terms where the Circle trusts commits to the WBC places demand.</li> </ul>

## 5 Cost and benefit appraisal of the recommended option

The recommendation is to contribute £1m to the refurbishment and redesign of the leisure centre to enable the provision of 330 extra school places. The value of the leisure centre site to WBC is for community use only. Therefore, if WBC protects its community use value, the total cost to WBC could be in the region of £1m total capital cost. A modular or new build would cost more than £5m anywhere it is in the borough and may be as high as £8m depending on the infrastructure and utility requirements.

## 6 Legal conditions under proposed transfer

The proposed lease arrangement for this transfer is a standard academy lease discharged under legislation whereby community schools and church schools normally use some land that their local authority owns as a long-term lease model for stability. As the site under consideration is contiguous, and so a Commercial Transfer Agreement will be the appropriate addendum to the St. Crispin’s school’s current lease term. And therefore, the leisure centre lease will expire at the same time as the original lease agreement for the school.

WBC have successfully renegotiated the clause in the existing contractual agreement with our leisure provider forbidding WBC from sponsoring a ‘Competing Facility’ within a 2-mile radius of another facility operated by the leisure provider and therefore the Circle Trust can offer Squash courts to continue.

There will be a clause that stipulates the squash provision continues as committed to by the Circle Trust. Clauses ensuring the statutory Health and Safety guardrails, including maintenance and infrastructure management will be included in the transfer agreement.

Where the Academy Trust may wish to end the lease or becomes insolvent, the asset is either transferred to an incoming trust that takes up the school or reverts to the council. There are guardrails to prevent insolvency as Academy trusts with deficits are subject to ESFA (Education School Funding Agency) who give early warnings and can intervene via the DfE where a trust is at risk.

Community service provision, anti-competition requirements, maintenance and service provision standards will be enforceable through a legal agreement.

The contract will also cover continued use of the Leisure Centre building as a polling station.

## 7 The Circle Trust’s commitment

WBC has listened to the concerns raised in the consultation and transparently shared these with the Circle Trust. They have made the following commitments should the leisure centre be passed to the Trust

1. Develop and maintain the centre and its sports facilities, enhancing the sports provision to benefit our students during the school day.
2. Support existing community groups using the facility such as the Squash players.
3. Support services that provided a wraparound care for young children so that parents and carers had the opportunity to work.
4. Welcome local charities and groups to use the site as a venue for events and meet-ups outside of school hours.

## 8 Supplementary update on other options

At the Overview and Scrutiny meeting, there were some options that officers were advised to further explore. The rationale has been summarised as follows:

1. Retain site for the use of the leisure centre							
This is the status quo option. However, the St. Crispin’s leisure centre has seen a 30% reduction in footfall since the opening of the new Carnival Hub which is less than one mile away. The table indicated the footfall reduction.							
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>Footfall</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>April 19 – March 20</td> <td>151,577</td> </tr> <tr> <td>April 22 – March 23</td> <td>105,399</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Year	Footfall	April 19 – March 20	151,577	April 22 – March 23	105,399
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This site represents one of six within the leisure management contract and is less than two miles from the new Carnival Hub therefore it is not viewed financially viable as a long-term leisure provision since the opening of Carnival Hub. The school has had an increasing requirement for use of the building, for example, as an examination centre, which has led to it being unavailable for approximately 9 weeks a year. This has impacted the ability of Places for Leisure to offer classes, both in terms of the restrictions in times, and in finding staff willing to work to the pattern of availability.							
<b>Meeting council priorities:</b>	Leisure facilities undoubtedly meet the Council priority of ‘enriching lives’ however the proximity of the new sports and community centre in the Carnival Hub and potential to offer classes at other locations mean the long-term viability is at risk.						
<b>Financial assessment</b>	With regards to revenue implication there will be numerous variables impacting on this leisure management annual fee, including the potential loss of this site and the disbursement of activities to other sites operated by the contractor. An annual income target is included in the base budget which is achieved and equalised over the contract through an Equalisation Fund. Furthermore, the current contractor has indicated that maintaining this site as part of the offering will be loss making.						

<b>Value for money</b>	Based on the financial assessment, there is a disbenefit in retaining the site and therefore would not be an effective use of council assets.
<b>Key risk</b>	Not financially viable as a long-term leisure provision since the opening of Carnival Hub.
<b>Risk mitigation</b>	Repurpose the use of the site to help address WBC needs and optimise the benefits that transfer to the school will bring to the community.

<b>2a. Hybrid use (Divide the building)</b>	
This model involves WBC dividing the site into two, so that Places for Leisure would retain the gym and squash courts while the school would have the main hall and ancillary areas. The site footprint would be smaller for each use. This has been rejected by Places for Leisure because it would adversely affect the Places for Leisure programme and the much smaller footprint. This has also been rejected by the school as it curtails the expansion plans and creating the extra spaces needed to grow. It also does not fully address the safeguarding issues.	
<b>Meeting council priorities:</b>	WBC has a statutory obligation to ensure that there are sufficient health and wellbeing facilities to meet the needs of its residents. It would cost circa £2m to repurpose.
<b>Financial assessment</b>	The Circle Trust and Places for Leisure have advised that this would not be operationally effective to adopt this model.
<b>Value for money</b>	The council will need to invest circa £2m to achieve this conversion, however as it is not operationally acceptable to the school or commercially viable to the leisure operator, it will not be value for money.
<b>Key risk</b>	Neither Places leisure nor Circle Trust are supportive of this option.
<b>Risk mitigation</b>	Opt for the transfer the site to the Circle Trust

<b>2b. Hybrid use (Block booking)</b>	
There was consideration on whether the leisure centre block-books the facilities that the school needs while retaining the management and operations by the leisure management contract. This model was not deemed viable for Places for Leisure because it would adversely impact flexibility of their programmes. This was also not accepted by the school because it would not address the long-term expansion or safeguarding needs.	
<b>Meeting council priorities:</b>	WBC has a statutory obligation to ensure that there are sufficient health and wellbeing facilities to meet the needs of its residents.
<b>Financial assessment</b>	This model does not address the case for change. It is also not supported by the leisure provider or the school because it is as a variation of the current arrangements where the school block-books the site for exams for example.
<b>Value for money</b>	WBC will need to invest circa £1m to improve the facilities, however this investment will not be value for money because it will not be advancing the priority needs of residents in either fitness or education.
<b>Key risk</b>	Neither Places leisure nor Circle Trust are supportive of this option.
<b>Risk mitigation</b>	Opt for the transfer the site to the Circle Trust

<b>2c. Provide space for the school at a different location</b>	
There was consideration as to whether a different council-owned property could provide the space the school needs. Examples of other properties that were considered included the Old Library, and Wokingham Youth & Community Centre. However, suitable properties are either occupied or have a more appropriate alternative use, and would require considerable work to repurpose them which is unlikely to be completed in the timescale required. Operating a split site would be difficult and expensive for the school, and safeguarding concerns would be difficult to address.	

<b>Meeting council priorities:</b>	Use of another building would impact the council's ability to reorganise its use of its properties to enable it to realise savings, or receipts from sales or rental income or to use the building in question for other services.
<b>Financial assessment</b>	The cost to repurpose a building would exceed the cost of transfer to the Circle Trust. There would also be potential loss to the council resulting from the inability to use whichever building was selected to support income generation, capital receipts or service cost reductions.
<b>Value for money</b>	As well as the additional cost of repurposing the building, there would be significant ongoing additional costs for the school in delivering education on two sites that are not geographically connected, as well as practical difficulties in moving students between the sites.
<b>Key risk</b>	Suitable WBC properties are either occupied or have a more appropriate alternative use
<b>Risk mitigation</b>	Opt for the transfer the site to the Circle Trust

## 9 Improvement works to:

The contribution of £1m from WBC is for immediate refurbishment that will be necessary to make the site ready ahead of the 24/25 academic year and become a sustainable long-term standard school provision. This will include.

- Gym to be removed and re-purposed as additional classrooms.
- Existing studio space X2 re-purposed as two extra classrooms.
- Provision of changing room facilities and indirectly increase teaching space.
- Provision of examination rooms
- Refurbishment of the sports hall for the provision of enhanced PE modules

## 10 Opportunities in other sites:

Montague Park community centre is being explored as an opportunity to accommodate any activities that are not able to be run at St. Crispin's or WBCs other leisure facilities in the vicinity. Places leisure have confirmed that they are willing to support the provision of activities at Montague Park subject to WBC being able to make this site financially viable.

However, BXG FIT is a smaller fitness centre in the council's ownership, in Peach Place, closer to St Crispin's than Carnival Hub, and on the same bus route. It is already operated by Places for Leisure. It is suitable and available to accommodate daytime activities which currently take place at St Crispins. It would meet the needs of those who indicated in the consultation that they would prefer a quieter and less high-tech venue than Carnival Hub. Places for Leisure are willing to support relocating activities to this venue. Places for Leisure are also willing to consider offering some classes in a room away from the main gym at Carnival Hub.

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