

# Leisure and Culture Provision Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group Report

March 2022

# Introduction and background

Leisure and sports provision has had some high profile discussion and publicity relatively recently and the Council's role in advocating for and enabling arts and cultural activities has changed in recent years.

Allerdale Borough Council's contract with its provider to run leisure centres is coming to the final years of the current agreement. Work has been started to take a fundamental look at leisure provision and the existing model of leisure centres, given what appear to be changing habits in physical activity. Work is also underway on the development of a Cultural Strategy for West Cumbria (Allerdale and Copeland footprint).

Overview and Scrutiny Committee have taken the view that leisure and culture provision is extremely important to our communities and it is important to track these pieces of work and other leisure and culture related activity.

The recent local government reorganisation announcement means that Allerdale Borough Council will be replaced by a new unitary local authority in 2023 covering the footprint of Allerdale, Copeland and Carlisle councils. It will be important to consider this context in relation to this review both in terms of transition to the new authority and how it plans to operate in the future.

## Leisure and Culture Task and Finish Group

At their meeting on 16 July 2021 Overview and Scrutiny Committee members were supportive of the establishment of a task and finish group to consider this review topic.

In line with an established approach to involve the wider membership in tasks and finish group work, all non-executive members were given the opportunity to join this group along with some members from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Two non-Scrutiny members joined this Task and Finish Group.

The Task and Finish Group membership consisted of:

Cllr Michael Heaslip (Chair)  
Cllr Janet Farebrother  
Cllr Ron Munby  
Cllr Paul Scott  
Cllr Andy Semple

## Review scope

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee set the scope of the review at their meeting 2 September 2021. The review was intended to follow different aspects of leisure and culture provision including:

- To consider the review of leisure services provision and how this work will transfer to the new unitary authority;
- To monitor engagement in and the effectiveness of the sports village proposals in Workington (including how this work will transfer to the new unitary authority);
- To consider the development of the cultural strategy for West Cumbria in terms of content, engagement of stakeholders and relevance to the new unitary authority;
- To consider how culture and leisure provision might be supported or delivered in future.

The review considered strategic approaches to leisure and culture provision rather than looking in detail at operational issues and questions.

## The Review

Over the course of three meetings, members considered a range of information relating to approaches to leisure and cultural provision in Allerdale. Officers provided an overview of the council's strategic approach to leisure provision, the development of the stadium in Workington and the development of a new cultural strategy for West Cumbria.

The Group were also updated on the work that had taken place to explore potential options for the delivery of leisure services in the near future. The Council's contract (and that of neighbouring Copeland Borough Council) with its provider to run leisure centres is coming to the final years of the current agreement. Joint exploratory work has been undertaken with Copeland Borough Council to take a fundamental look at leisure provision and what might be possible in the future. This work is scheduled to continue as part of the local government reorganisation programme.

The Group were keen to understand the background to the commissioning of a new Cultural Strategy for West Cumbria and see the draft outline of the strategy as it developed. Officers also provided an overview of the Creative People and Places bid that was bringing funding to West Cumbria for community arts programmes.

Documents considered by the TFG included:

- Allerdale Indoor Sports Strategy
- Allerdale Playing Pitch Strategy
- Resilient Communities Strategy
- The strategy commission for the West Cumbria Cultural Strategy
- Carlisle's Strategic Cultural Framework
- The draft outline of the West Cumbria Cultural Strategy
- List of stakeholders involved in the development of the West Cumbria Cultural Strategy
- Mapping of cultural facilities and organisations in West Cumbria

## Findings and recommendations

### Summary of the Group's findings

Members discussed the importance of culture, leisure and sports to communities in Allerdale and felt it was important for that to be highlighted in this report.

Members recognise the potential for investment in culture leisure and sport to contribute to wider outcomes. The health benefits of sport and leisure activities are clear, with non-traditional sport, physical activity and informal active recreation as important as formal sports activities and provision in terms of health and wellbeing. Alongside this, the value that cultural activity and the enjoyment of open and natural spaces can have in improving physical and mental wellbeing have increasingly been recognised and evidenced.

There are secondary benefits of engaging in physical activity, arts and heritage activities such – it can encourage skill development and employability, save on transport costs and reduce congestion through activities like walking and cycling, helping the environment.

It is also important to recognise the key role that leisure opportunities play in placemaking. Access to sports, arts and culture have been shown to be a key element in making places attractive to both live in and visit.

Members felt that for these reasons it was important to see leisure and culture as central to provision and programmes, not optional or an afterthought.

Leisure and cultural services and facilities in Allerdale are offered by a wide range of providers including commercial, third sector and voluntary groups as well as the Council and other public sector organisations. The Council remains a key provider of sport, art and leisure opportunities, and the work of the Council is broad and varied, covering everything from parks and open spaces to leisure centres and playing pitches.

The Group recognised that the pattern of formal provision of sport and leisure and culture by the Council was in large part based on historical patterns of provision and not necessarily on up to date analysis of needs/expectations of communities across Allerdale.

There is effective mapping in place of sports and physical activity facilities across Allerdale and across sectors. Mapping of cultural facilities and activities has previously been less comprehensive although the development of the West Cumbria Cultural Strategy is beginning to deal with this issue.

The Group note that Active Cumbria does a good job in supporting the voluntary sports sector, but there does appear to be a lack of similar enabling and support organisations for the culture sector. The Group recognised that the West Cumbria Cultural Strategy may help cultural organisations access funding and support via the Arts Council in future.

Collaboration with Copeland on the contracting of council sports and leisure provision has begun and as the two leisure contracts end at the same date there may be potential for a single contract across Allerdale and Copeland, although the group recognise that the Carlisle contract has a much later end date.

The Group did not consider the detail of the Sports Village proposal within the submitted Town Deal bid as the timing of the final proposal did not fit the Groups timetable; however the Group was satisfied that all available information on local provision and need for sporting facilities had been made available to the authors of the bid.

## Recommendations

1. Corporate and community planning for the new Cumberland Council should recognise the centrality of sport leisure and culture in the life of the communities it serves and accord it a high policy priority.
2. The future pattern of sports, leisure and cultural provision across Cumberland should be based on deeper analysis of legitimate expectations of our communities as to what can be provided locally by whichever provider (with or without council support). Council support should not always be read as financial support, but may be a range of other things.
3. It should be recognised that Allerdale is made up of a number of different places and the new Cumberland Council will be made up of an even larger number of different places and

any policy arrangements should reflect the different character, nature and circumstances of those different places.

4. Cumberland Council Shadow Authority need to make an early decision to adopt a single contract for sports and leisure provision across Allerdale and Copeland areas and consider whether the contract management system adopted by the new Cumberland Council could integrate the Carlisle contract.
5. The West Cumbria Cultural Strategy needs to be completed and its recommendations considered by the Council. The final draft version should be presented to all councillors.

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