
Sports Hub Task & Finish Group Report

Committee considering report:	Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee
Date of Committee:	16 September 2025
Task & Finish Group Chairman:	Councillor Carolyn Culver
Date Task & Finish Group agreed report:	30 July 2025
Report Author:	Councillor Carolyn Culver

1 Purpose of the Report

This report presents the findings of the Sports Hub Task and Finish Group, which sought to determine whether there was a strategically and financially sound business case for the Monks Lane Sports Hub, whether the project was well managed, and whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles. The report makes recommendations based on the evidence gathered, which (if implemented) would help to inform the Council's approach to future sports and leisure projects.

2 Recommendation(s)

To consider the Task and Finish Group's recommendations as outlined in Section 6 of this report and agree whether these should be referred to the Executive for consideration.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted, this may result in financial implications which will be assessed in detail in the response to the Exec
Human Resource:	There are no HR implications arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted, this may result in HR implications, which will be assessed in detail if they are taken forward.

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Legal:	Task and Finish Group's recommendations are set out in this report for consideration by the Executive. Recommendation 25 outlines that the Council should refer itself to the LGSCO. This would be highly irregular. If there is a suggestion of any proposal or decision of the Council has given rise to or is likely to or would give rise to any illegality, maladministration or breach of statutory code, the Monitoring Officer is under a duty to prepare a report to Council under Sections 5 and 5A of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (LGHA 89). It may be appropriate for the report to be considered in private under Local Government Act 1972 schedule 12A to ensure that individual offices are not identified. This will be a decision of the Monitoring Officer balancing the public interest in disclosing such information. If the recommendations are accepted, there are likely to be legal implications arising.			
Risk Management:	There are no risk management implications arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted by the Executive, this may result in risk management implications, which will be assessed in detail if they are taken forward.			
Property:	There are no property implications arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted by the Executive, this may result in property implications, which will be assessed in detail if they are taken forward.			
Policy:	There are no policy implications arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted, this may result in policy implications, which will be assessed in detail if they are taken forward.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				

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A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		There are no equalities implications arising directly from this report.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		The proposed decision does not have any impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics.
Environmental Impact:		X		There are no environmental impacts arising directly from this report.
Health Impact:		X		There are no health impacts arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted by the Executive, this may result in more effective delivery of sports facilities, which would have a knock-on implication for the physical activity levels within the local population.
ICT Impact:		X		There are no ICT impacts arising directly from this report.
Digital Services Impact:		X		There are no impacts for Digital Services arising directly from this report.
Council Strategy Priorities:		X		There are no Council Strategy Priorities arising directly from this report, although if the Task and Finish Group's recommendations are accepted by the Executive, this would have implications for Priority 4: A Prosperous and Resilient West Berkshire, which includes an action to work with the local sporting community to finalise plans for new Community Sports

				Stadium at Faraday Road. This would also have implications for Priority 5: Thriving Communities with a Strong Local Voice, which includes an action around delivery of the updated Playing Pitch Strategy.
Core Business:		X		Improving project governance is part of the core business of delivering services.
Data Impact:		X		There are no data impacts associated with this report.
Consultation and Engagement:	A full list of stakeholders and expert witnesses consulted is contained in the Task and Finish Group's report.			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 This report presents the work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group set up by the Scrutiny Commission to determine whether there was a strategically and financially sound business case for the Sports Hub, whether the project was well managed, and whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles.
- 4.2 Members of the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee are invited to review the recommendations and consider whether these should be put to the Executive for consideration.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.2 At its meeting on 24 September 2024, the Scrutiny Commission agreed the terms of reference and membership for a Task and Finish Group to review the business case for the Monks Lane Sports Hub and the consistency of advice given to Members at Planning Committees where related applications were considered, and at Executive where decisions were made about proceeding with the project. The Task and Finish Group was asked to develop recommendations for lessons learned that could be applied to similar projects in future.
- 5.3 The review focused on six objectives:
- (1) To determine whether the Sports Hub project was value for money.
 - (2) To determine whether the project would have delivered on the council's strategic objectives.
 - (3) To determine whether the project was well managed.
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- (4) To determine whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles.
- (5) To determine whether the council's decision to abandon the project in its original form was a strategically and financially sound decision.
- (6) To establish whether the council intends to deliver any elements of the original project at Monks Lane (bearing in mind planning permission remains and project funds are being carried forward).

5.4 A copy of the Task and Finish Group's terms of reference is provided as Appendix A.

Background

- 5.5 The Task and Finish Group met four times between November 2024 and February 2025 to hear evidence from witnesses in relation to the review. These included Council officers (including former officers), representatives from relevant external organisations and members of the public who have a long-standing interest in the project.
- 5.6 Members heard evidence from former and current Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Sport and Leisure. Sport England was invited to give evidence, but declined to take part.
- 5.7 Through evaluation of the evidence collected and with technical support from officers, Members have been able to highlight a number of issues and identify where it is considered that potential improvements could be made, or where further work would be beneficial.
- 5.8 Councillor Culver as Chair prepared an initial report, for consideration at the Scrutiny Commission meeting on 13 March 2025. However, Members resolved that:
 - the report should not be discussed at that meeting, and that it should be deferred so further work could be undertaken; and
 - a special meeting of the Scrutiny Commission be arranged to consider the Sports Hub Task and Finish Group report.
- 5.9 A further meeting of the Task and Finish Group was held on 16 June 2025 in order to hear evidence from Sarah Clarke (Executive Director – Resources) and Sharon Armour (Legal Services Manager). The report was subsequently updated to reflect the additional evidence provided and to respond to feedback received on the initial draft report. It was agreed with the Deputy Monitoring Officer that this should be considered by the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee, since the Scrutiny Commission was deleted as part of the changes to the scrutiny structure agreed at the Annual Meeting of Council on 15 May 2025.

6 Proposals

- 6.1 The Task and Finish Group has developed a set of recommendations as set out below. Subject to the approval of the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee, these
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recommendations will be referred to Executive for consideration at a later date, accompanied by a management response.

- 6.2 It should be noted that many of the recommendations are related to project management and governance aspects. As such, there may be some overlap with the Project Management Task and Finish Group. It was originally planned that the Project Management Task Group would review three separate projects, but it was agreed that since the Sports Hub had already been reviewed, the Project Management Task and Finish Group's remit could be reduced accordingly.

Ref	Recommendation	Priority
Objective One: To determine whether the Sports Hub project was value for money		
1.	Council projects must achieve policy and strategic objectives while maximising value for money. There must be documentation demonstrating that all options have been considered, including cost comparisons.	High
2.	The business case must be maintained throughout the project and reviewed at any major change or stage gate by the project board.	High
3.	Projects must have clear tolerance thresholds, including budget and timescale.	High
4.	Hours spent on capital projects by 'business as usual' staff must be recorded and allocated against the correct capital project code. Each project should have a 'partner' in the finance team to help the project manager ensure they are recording this information correctly.	Medium
5.	The council should be fully transparent about its rationale for major decisions that involve large amounts of public money, and in particular its reasons for not following the advice of experts it has commissioned.	High
6.	The Council should have the courage to abandon a project if it is apparent that more cost-effective options are available.	High
7.	When members of the public or community groups present a serious alternative project (having a business plan backed by Sport England and receiving planning permission is an indicator of seriousness), the Council should consider whether this alternative fulfils the strategic need identified by the Council and whether it represents value for money. The relevant portfolio holder should respond formally to the alternative project proposal, in the interests of transparency and accountability.	High
8.	If the Council enters a partnership with a private entity, the Rugby Club in this case, it must be able to justify that it meets strategic need and is value for money compared with other options. Taxpayers' money must not be used to subsidise private entities when the funds could be spent more effectively elsewhere.	High

Objective Two: To determine whether the project would have delivered on the Council's strategic objectives		
9.	Executive should ensure that Council projects meet objectives laid out in strategic documents. If it becomes apparent that strategic objectives cannot be met by the options available to the Council, this should be explained to the public in the interests of accountability and transparency, and strategies and business cases refreshed accordingly.	High
10.	The new Playing Pitch Strategy should look at all options including agricultural land and the North-East Thatcham area where large scale development is planned. If members ask in future what options have been considered, there should be documentary proof including cost comparisons.	High
11.	Stage E Reviews of the Playing Pitch Strategy should be undertaken with governing bodies including Berks and Bucks FA, 'to ensure delivery against the recommendations and action plan and ensure that it is kept robust and up to date' as the Sport England Playing pitch Strategy guidance recommends, so that information is no more than two years' old. Any material changes must be captured.	Low
12.	The council must fully engage with stakeholders on projects of this scale. This should include a full public consultation. Town and parish councils, when a scheme affects their area, should be consulted.	High
Objective Three: To determine whether the project was well managed		
13.	All Council ventures from initial inception through to delivery and closure should be run with the most appropriate project management method, with full traceability of Risks, Issues, Actions committed to and undertaken, Dependencies and Decisions made captured. All project board meeting documentation (not just an agenda and action log per meeting) should be retained and decisions captured. All options should be documented by officers, and decisions on those options by councillors and senior management/executive should also be documented. This aids sound and transparent decision making, and auditability. It also protects the reputation of the Council.	High
14.	Project officers must make use of the document templates in the intranet project management toolkit. Any exceptions should be agreed by the project board.	High
15.	The Executive Leadership Team should commit to providing project leaders with the (refresher) training they need to perform their role effectively and monitor its use and effectiveness.	Medium
16.	Project management records should be kept in good order. If some elements of a project are managed in house, and some by external consultants, there still needs to be a well-ordered archive of documents so that future officers can find the documents. Project management documentation should be shared on a	High

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	continuous basis and kept in a single repository for aid of audit. The Council might choose to outsource project management but should not outsource project governance.	
17.	Senior managers and Executive members overseeing major projects should be able to articulate the objectives clearly and know where the relevant documents are.	High
18.	All projects need to have a project closure report.	High
19.	The findings and recommendations of this Sports Hub task and finish group and the LRIE task and finish group of 2020 must be shared with the chairman of the project management task and finish group, so that the learnings can be considered when they examine other Council projects. They are due to begin their work after the Sports Hub task and finish group completes its work.	High
20.	The final copy of the task and finish group report (this document) should be logged in a central repository along with the other documentation collated by WBC Programme Management Office (PMO) for the Sports Hub Project.	Medium
Objective Four: To determine whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles		
21.	Consistent, evidence-based advice must be given to members of planning committees. The legal team should check all planning reports where the Council is the applicant. Members of District Planning Committee should not be given advice that is contradictory to what was previously presented to Western or Eastern Area Planning Committee. If the Council decides that its advice to a committee was incorrect or misleading it should be transparent about this and re-present the application to Western or Eastern Area Planning Committee using correct and clear advice.	High
22.	When members of Corporate Board are aware of contradictory and confusing advice relating to council applications and Executive papers, they must ensure members and the public receive clear communication.	High
23.	When the Council is the planning applicant and/or the project concerned is being promoted by the Executive, members of the Executive should not vote on that application at planning committee meetings. They should either be substituted for that meeting or, if present, they should declare that they are predetermined and take no part in the debate or vote while the application is being considered. This is essential to retain the trust of the public in the planning decision making process. This should be added to the Constitution.	High
24.	Complete records of FOI requests must be kept, including reasons for responses to requests. This will allow audit to understand why certain documents may or may not have been released.	High
25.	The Council must refer itself to the Local Government Ombudsman and ask them to consider the contents of this report.	High

Objective five: To determine whether the Council's decision to abandon the project in its original form was a strategically and financially sound decision		
26.	The Sports Hub project should have been promptly closed after the Executive decided they were not going to proceed with it, and all project accounts completed.	Medium
27.	A project like the Faraday Road refurbishment project start with a new baseline, be a distinct project, and had its own budget line.	Medium
Objective six: To establish whether the Council intends to deliver any elements of the original project at Monks Lane (bearing in mind planning permission remains and project funds are being carried forward)		
n/a	There were no recommendations arising.	

7 Other options considered

The Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee may choose to accept the Task and Finish Group's recommendations in full or in part, or amend the recommendations before putting them to the Executive. Alternatively, the Committee may choose not to put any of the report's recommendations to the Executive if it considers that they are not appropriate.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 The proposals outlined in Section 6 above have been agreed by the Task and Finish Group, based on the evidence presented. It is considered that these could be applied to similar projects in future.
- 8.2 While some of these proposals could be actioned relatively quickly, at minimal cost and with existing resources, it is recognised that others may have financial and resource implications.

9 Appendices

Appendix A – Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference

Appendix B – Task and Finish Group Report (Part II)

Background Papers:

None

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☐ No: ☒

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval ☐

Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council ☐

Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position ☐

Considered or reviewed by a Scrutiny Committee or associated Task Groups within preceding six months ☒

Item is Urgent Key Decision ☐

Report is to note only ☐

Wards affected: All wards

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Document Control

Document Ref:		Date Created:	
Version:		Date Modified:	
Author:			
Owning Service			

Change History

Version	Date	Description	Change ID
1			
2			

Appendix A

Overview and Scrutiny Review Matrix

Review Topic: Sports Hub

Timescale

Start: October 2024

Finish: January 2025

Review Rationale:

To determine whether there was a strategically and financially sound business case for the Sports Hub, and whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles.

Terms of Reference:

To determine whether the Sports Hub project was value for money.

To determine whether the project would have delivered on the council's strategic objectives.

To determine whether the project was well managed.

To determine whether reliable and consistent advice was given to members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles.

To determine whether the council's decision to abandon the project in its original form was a strategically and financially sound decision.

To establish whether the council intends to deliver any elements of the original project at Monks Lane (bearing in mind planning permission remains and project funds are being carried forward).

To determine what lessons can be learned from this project.

Review Membership:

Councillor Carlyne Culver
Councillor Jeremy Cottam
Councillor Paul Dick
Councillor David Marsh
Councillor Chris Read

Chairman: Councillor Carlyne Culver

Scrutiny Officer: Gordon Oliver

Information Required

Documents/Evidence:

Sports Hub business case and all associated costs
Playing Pitch Strategy including Stage E Review 2022 and documentation relating to the planned 2024 review
Sports Hub planning application and associated papers

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Western Area Planning Committee agenda pack (15 December 2021)
Executive decision 4149 (16 December 2021)
District Planning Committee agenda pack (2 March 2022)
WBC 'Defendant's Detailed Grounds of Resistance' presented to the High Court (22 September 2022)
Executive decision 4332 (23 March 2023)
LRIE task and finish group final report presented to OSMC (as Scrutiny Commission was formerly known) on 28 July 2020

Witnesses:

Internal

Councillor Howard Woollaston, former Executive Member for Housing, Leisure, Culture and Sport
Councillor Nigel Foot, current Executive Member for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside
Shannon Colman-Slaughter, Service Director – Finance and Property
April Peberdy, Service Director - Communities
Sarah Clarke, Solicitor – Service Director, Strategy & Governance
Masie Masiwa, Senior Planning Officer, Development & Regulation
Simon Till, Team Leader (Development Control), Development & Regulation

External

Sport England
Newbury Community Football Group
Alan Pearce
Paul Morgan
Newbury Rugby Club
Lynne Doherty, former Leader of WBC
Consultants who worked on the project who have since left WBC – acknowledging that they would not be obliged to attend to give evidence

Measures Available

Desired Outcomes:

To meet the objectives outlined in the terms of reference and produce a document of findings for Scrutiny Commission.