

Community and Cultural Facilities

This topic addresses: Thriving city/local centres, community facilities, healthcare/GP, schools, facilities for young people, children’s play areas and other services such as shops.

SA Objective: 6. To provide accessible essential **services and facilities**.

SEA Theme: Material assets and health.

Introduction

This topic paper focuses on Oxford’s community and cultural facilities. These include community centres, schools, children’s centres, meeting venues for the public or voluntary organisations, public halls, places of worship, leisure and indoor sports centres and recreational facilities, pavilions, stadiums, public houses, club premises or arts buildings, performance venues and libraries.

Community and cultural facilities help foster a sense of community and belonging, enhancing health and wellbeing. They may function as a meeting place, a place for leisure and fitness, a place for community and interest groups to meet and so on. This paper provides a context for considering the subject by providing a brief summary of the relevant national and local plans, policies and programmes that currently exist and will influence change in the future. A section on Oxford’s existing community and cultural facilities includes some key headlines identifying the importance of these to both residents of the city and the county. As part of an assessment of the current facilities this paper identifies some of the key challenges and future trends that will impact on these facilities. The paper then explores what would happen without a plan and the potential difficulties that the city would face. The final section puts forward some ideas for discussion to suggest what the Plan could do to in terms of objectives to meet the plans, policies and programmes.

Plans Policies and Programmes

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF makes it clear that *the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development*. Paragraph 8 recognises however that this comprises achieving three overarching objectives, which are independent but need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways. These comprise economic, social and environmental objectives. The social objective is required ‘to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, and by fostering a well-designed and safe built environment, with **accessible services and open spaces** that reflect current and future needs and support communities’ **health, social and cultural well-being**’ (para 8b);

‘Strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and quality of development, and make sufficient provision for: c) **community facilities** (such as health, education and cultural infrastructure)’ (para 20).

*‘Non- strategic policies should be used by local planning authorities and communities to set out more detailed policies for specific areas, neighbourhoods or types of development. This can include allocating sites, the provision of infrastructure and **community facilities** at a local level.....’ (para 28).*

Chapter 8 of the framework addresses the promotion of healthy and safe communities suggesting that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which *‘enable and support healthy lifestyles..... for example through the provision of..... **sports facilities**’ (para 91c).*

The framework also states that *‘to provide the social, recreational and **cultural facilities** and services the community needs, planning policies and decisions should plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, **community facilities** (such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship) and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments; b) take into account and support the delivery of local strategies to improve health, social and **cultural well-being** for all sections of the community; c) guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community’s ability to meet its day-to-day needs; d) ensure that established shops, **facilities** and services are able to develop and modernise, and are retained for the benefit of the community; and e) ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and **community facilities and services**’ (para 92).*

Finally the framework suggests that *‘Planning policies and decisions should ensure that new development can be integrated effectively with existing businesses and **community facilities** (such as places of worship, pubs, music venues and sports clubs). Existing businesses and facilities should not have unreasonable restrictions placed on them as a result of development permitted after they were established. Where the operation of an existing business or **community facility** could have a significant adverse effect on new development (including changes of use) in its vicinity, the applicant (or ‘agent of change’) should be required to provide suitable mitigation before the development has been completed’ (para 183).*

White Paper: Planning for the Future

The Planning for the Future White Paper (2020) includes proposals for changing the Community Infrastructure Levy/ S.106 planning obligations system to fund infrastructure differently. That has potential implications on funding streams for identified new/ improved community facilities. There are not enough details in the proposals at the moment to know what the impacts may be on forming infrastructure. However, this will be most relevant to the type of large new development that rarely happens in Oxford. In Oxford the approach generally is to protect our existing facilities.

Oxfordshire Plan 2050

The Oxfordshire Local Planning Authorities (including Oxford City Council), working together through the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal, are working towards the development of a Joint Statutory Spatial Plan (JSSP), known as the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, which will set out strategic policies for the county to 2050. An initial consultation was launched on the Plan in February 2019 and a further consultation is being launched in the summer of 2021. The summer 2021 consultation will include a number of options, which will be concerned only with strategic facilities and not any local (non-strategic) facilities.

The Oxfordshire Plan will be submitted to the Secretary of State for examination in September 2022. It will be important to ensure that the Oxfordshire Plan and the Oxford Local Plan 2040 work closely together; there will be many common themes and objectives and much shared evidence behind the two plans.

Council Strategy 2020- 2024

The priorities of Oxford City Council’s Strategy 2020-24 are to enable an inclusive economy, deliver more affordable housing, support thriving communities and pursue a zero carbon Oxford. To help support thriving communities the Council Strategy includes aims to:

- Implement an Equalities Action Plan that shapes our services and use of our community assets to address inequalities particularly for disadvantaged, hard to reach and excluded groups;
- Develop data sources to better understand the strengths and needs of our diverse communities and to target our work to where the gaps are;
- Work with local residents to understand their needs and simplify the way they can engage with us and involve them more in design and decision-making in regard to Council services and facilities in their local communities;
- Modernise our community assets and explore innovative approaches for their operation which encourages engagement and a sense of community ownership
- Celebrate diversity by supporting and stimulating a wide variety of events and cultural activities that bring Oxford people together.

The strategy is designed to be used as a framework to guide thinking and decision-making and resource allocation. It is underpinned by the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2020- 2024 that sets out the financial priorities and commitments over the next four years. To support the delivery of the strategy, the Council will produce an annual Business Plan¹ that will set specific priorities for the year ahead and report on progress against agreed key performance indicators. In turn the Business Plan will be complemented by Oxford City Council’s annual Budget* (insert ref) that will allocate resources against the priorities set.

Oxford City Council’s Strategy for Children and Young People 2018-2022²

This strategy shows how the City Council will use its services and resources to support young people in Oxford. It aims to ensure that partnerships already developed are built on, enabling a structured collaboration between various groups that support young people’s journeys into adulthood, such as schools, community groups, and healthcare providers. It identifies the importance of increased use of community centres by young people, maximising the benefits of leisure centres for young people and using our cultural services to support young people. The strategy is designed to complement the Children’s Trust’s Oxfordshire’s Children and Young People’s Plan 2018–2021³, a joint plan developed by a number of organisations that sets the strategic direction and priorities for services for children, young people and families in Oxfordshire.

¹ <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/7527/oxford-city-council-business-plan-2020-21>

² <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/youthambition/downloads/file/25/children-and-young-peoples-strategy>

³ <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/childreducationandfamilies/ChildrenAndYoungPeoplePlan2018-2021.pdf>

Oxford Local Plan 2036

The policy approach to cultural and community facilities is to make accessible a diverse range of facilities; seek to protect existing facilities; and support improvements and more intensive use of existing sites.

Policy V7 on infrastructure and cultural and community facilities seeks to improve access to social and community infrastructure in particular from new development, and protect and retain existing cultural and community facilities. The policy also indicates that planning permission will be granted for the alteration and expansion of existing schools, primary healthcare facilities and community centres; and that new schools, primary healthcare facilities and communities centres will receive planning permission where the City Council is satisfied that a number of criteria have been met.

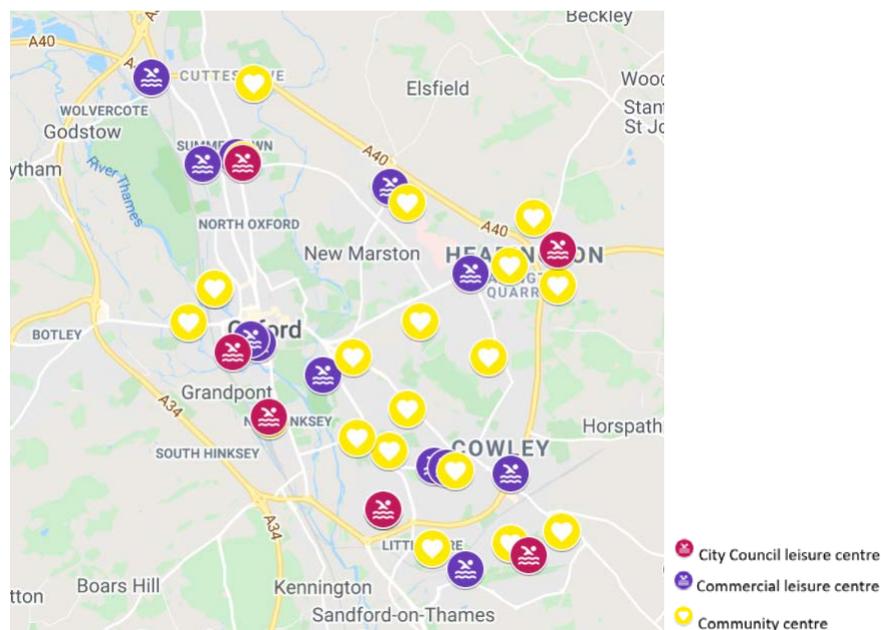
Policy G5 on existing open space, indoor and outdoor sports and recreation facilities seeks to protect indoor sport and leisure facilities. The policy also indicates that the City Council will, where the opportunity to do so arises, seek public access to private and institutional facilities (e.g. those owned by colleges and private schools) through sharing schemes and joint user agreements. This is considered further within the Public Open Space and Outdoor Sport topic paper.

Current situation

Existing community and leisure facilities

Figure 1 shows Oxford's community and leisure facilities.

Figure 1. Existing community and leisure facilities (Google, 2021)⁴



⁴<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=194sYIxu3Ch9NY50knBBjODK-PSa2iLJ&ll=51.75253006531467%2C-1.247969699999934&z=13>

Oxford's leisure centres provide a range of indoor sports including swimming pools, gyms, sports halls, crèches, spinning studios, children's soft play, community and group exercise halls and squash courts. A number of these leisure centres operate on a commercial basis (e.g. provide private membership options). Some leisure centres also provide opportunities for outdoor sports but this is not addressed within this topic paper⁵.

Oxford City Council Leisure Centre Locations:

- Barton Leisure Centre,
- Leys Pools and Leisure Centre,
- Ferry Leisure Centre,
- Hinksey Outdoor Pool,
- Oxford Ice Rink,
- Rose Hill Community Centre Gym.

There are 20 community centres located across the city owned by the City Council but managed by Community Associations: South Oxford, East Oxford, Florence Park, Donnington, Regal Community Centre, West Oxford, Rose Hill, North Oxford Association, Headington, Cuttleslowe, Northway, Jericho, Littlemore, Barton Neighbourhood Centre, The Venue@Cowley, Blackbird Leys, Bullingdon, Risinghurst, Cheney, Jubilee77. These community centres offer a number of welfare, educational and recreational activities that residents can get involved in. These can include health and fitness opportunities (e.g. yoga classes), sports (e.g. judo and dance), dedicated groups/sessions for parents and children and the elderly, junior and youth entertainment (e.g. Scouts and Guides) and religious groups. Tenants are granted community leases subject to a number of criteria being met by applicant organisations.

In addition to leisure and community centres there are a number of commercial facilities in the City that overlap with leisure. These include cinemas and theatres, public houses (including social enterprise venues), live music- venues, nightclubs, bowling, karting, laser combat, private leisure centres/ gyms, children's soft play areas (Partyman), escape rooms, indoor golf and climbing walls.

Cultural facilities in the city include 8 libraries (Barton, Blackbird Leys, Cowley, Headington, Littlemore, Old Marston, Summertown and Oxfordshire), 12 museums and numerous places of worship. Some of these facilities are commercial, e.g. 9 theatres. Oxford City has a rich variety of religious communities. As well as offering dedicated places of worship many of the religious facilities offer opportunity for more general community use in a similar way to community centres e.g. church halls.

There are also a number of leisure and community facilities across the City's schools and universities which are made available for community use through user agreements. There are clearly links between leisure and community facilities and infrastructure: further information can be found in the Infrastructure Topic Paper⁶.

⁵ www.oxford.gov.uk/2040/Greeninfrastructure

⁶ www.oxford.gov.uk/2040/Infrastructure

Existing Schools and Colleges

Oxford has over 50 primary schools which are well distributed across the city, allowing easy access to local schools. Secondary schools in Oxford are also distributed fairly evenly across the city, meaning they are also easily in reach of where people live. Secondary schools include Matthew Arnold (just outside the city boundary, in Botley), The Cherwell School, Cheney School, St Gregory the Great, Oxford Spires and the Oxford Academy, as well as the new Swan School. In addition there are a number of public schools across the city. The secondary schools vary considerably in terms of their performance. In 2019 (the most recent year performance comparison information is available for) the Cherwell School had a performance 8 score of 0.75, well above average and the highest in Oxfordshire. At the other end of the scale, The Oxford Academy had a performance 8 score of -0.6, which is well below average and the lowest for a standard state school in Oxfordshire.

Existing GP practices

The Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (OCCG) is the organisation that plans, buys and oversees health services for the people of Oxfordshire. All GP practices in Oxfordshire are members of the OCCG. There are 20 practices in Oxford that are part of the OCCG. The OCCG monitors population forecasts to help inform decisions about whether any expanded provision is necessary.

Likely trends without a new local plan

It is important that we continue to protect and enhance the City's existing leisure and community facilities, otherwise there is a risk that these facilities could be lost to or replaced with another land use (e.g. housing). This could be detrimental not only to people's health but also their wellbeing. In the absence of a new Local Plan, we would be reliant on the planning policies within the existing Local Plan 2036. Beyond 2036 it would only be national policies that would offer protection and these may not necessarily be detailed or specific enough to protect the diverse range of leisure and community facilities across the city.

What trends do data show?

Balance between housing demand and other use of land: It is important to support sustainable growth and to protect existing leisure and community facilities for either their existing use or redevelopment and modernisation. It is well documented that there is a shortage of land in Oxford and a strong demand for housing. Striking a balance between the demand for housing and other land uses is a key strategic issue. Facilities are protected in the Oxford Local Plan 2036. It will be important to look again at this balance, especially with an updated understanding of what demands will be given a growth in population.

Covid-19 Impacts – The pandemic has significantly affected cultural facilities and the leisure and entertainment industry. Many venues have had to close during lockdown periods (e.g. cinemas, pubs, music venues). It is not known at the present time whether those that have managed to continue operating will recover fully, or whether operational requirements will change in the long term resulting in the need for different operating models e.g. reduced capacity or as a shared facility/space

or whether there will be unavoidable closures and losses. However, prior to the lockdowns there seemed to be a trend towards more 'experience' focused activities within town centres, with shops having to do more to attract people away from online shopping, and with a move to visiting centres for experiences and social reasons rather than just to shop. Small, private gyms in shopping areas have become more common. The Westgate for example includes a gym, as well as food and drink offer, a cinema, and escape room and indoor crazy golf.

Although the pandemic has had many adverse impacts, it has also changed the way communities and neighbourhoods have viewed their local areas. With restrictions being placed on people's movements, many have had to spend more time within their local areas, which has led to local neighbourhoods becoming more important and valued. In addition, many people have also re-evaluated their leisure time, seeking opportunities to take a break from technology and screen time and get out and about more in their local areas. This may have involved seeking opportunities to participate more in sports (including group exercise/ team sports as restrictions have been lifted) and also engaging more with local organisations, for example taking up volunteering opportunities to help others – e.g. helping with community food kitchens. It is difficult to know at present whether these trends will continue as we emerge from the pandemic and begin rebuilding our lives, but it is likely that local neighbourhoods and communities and the facilities they offer will continue to play an important role in our daily lives.

Options for the new Local Plan

There are questions over the exact nature that community and cultural facilities may take in future. The periods of lockdown have forced many more activities and community meetings to take place online, rather than in traditional community buildings. It may be the case that some functions do not need to take place either in person or in the traditional buildings, or some services could be provided in a different way. Flexible thinking may be needed, for example joining facilities and ensuring the most efficient use is made of assets. Allowing diversification of centres is likely to be important, considering social, leisure and cultural activity as key to maintaining vibrancy of these centres, alongside traditional retail. A local focus that ensures appropriate facilities are at the heart of local communities will also be important.

Conclusion

The importance of adequate availability of community and cultural facilities is evident. The functions they provide can be as a meeting place, a place for leisure and fitness, a place for community and interest groups to meet and so on. Cultural community and leisure facilities help to support strong communities, healthy lifestyles, wellbeing, and a sense of community and belonging. There has been a change in the cultural and leisure landscape as a result of Covid-19, which has in some ways perhaps just accelerated changes. The Local Plan 2040 should take a flexible approach that enables the types of facilities needed and that protects or ensures provision. This will help achieve health and wellbeing objectives, and help to overcome inequalities.

Sustainability/Plan issues

- The impacts of permitted development allowed between town centre uses and housing will need to be monitored to see whether it is affecting provision of community and cultural facilities.
- With pressure for housing, it will be important to make a case for the importance of the facilities that support this housing.
- Many commercial facilities have suffered during lockdown, but local government's resources may also be more limited. There may need to be changes to the way some services are delivered and the way some facilities are run. Combined facilities and flexible facilities will be important to maximise the usage and respond to changing demands.