

East Sussex County Council  
County Hall  
St Anne's Crescent  
Lewes, BN7 1UE



## Response to consultation on future options for Uckfield Leisure Centre

26 May 2023

Dear East Sussex County Council,

Uckfield Town Council begins by clearly stating its strong opposition to any loss of community access to the 'wetside' and 'dryside' facilities of Uckfield Leisure Centre (*including the swimming pool, indoor sports hall, squash courts, fitness rooms, sauna and studio*). They must be considered together and seen as one, to support our residents and service users.

The Town Council has been actively encouraging service users and residents to respond to this important public consultation.

### Supporting population growth

Uckfield's population grew by 30% between 1991 and 2021, and is due to increase further in the next ten years, with a number of large-scale planning applications being delivered, approved for development or submitted for consideration. 1250 homes have already been approved in Uckfield, and the town is likely to see this rise with a number of applications coming forward. Major planning applications refer to Uckfield Leisure Centre as the nearest sports and leisure provider, and developers are keen to promote the short distances by car and on foot. The transport assessments produced for these applications do not however take account of the extra traffic movements should Uckfield's facilities be removed.

Despite growth, the town continues to lose its key facilities. Uckfield has already lost its Youth Centre and dedicated Post Office, with the Library and Children's Centre running reduced hours. There is frequent demand for community space and sports pitches, with current facilities overstretched and already at capacity.

### Uckfield and the wider catchment area

Uckfield Leisure Centre is a well-loved leisure facility and is incredibly well-used, as evidenced by footfall statistics made publicly available in response to a Freedom of Information request in April 2023 on [whatdotheyknow.com](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com).<sup>1</sup> Uckfield has a population of around 15,000, but as outlined in Wealden's Local Development Framework, the town acts as a key service centre for the surrounding villages (*Buxted, Blackboys, East Hoathly, Fairwarp, Fletching, Framfield, Hadlow Down, Halland, High Hurstwood, Isfield, Little Horsted, Maresfield, Nutley and Pitdown to name those in the immediate vicinity*). We therefore also speak for the wider catchment area of Uckfield.

### Current footfall

These statistics demonstrate the vital importance of Uckfield Leisure Centre, and in particular the pool, with footfall much higher than that of Crowborough Leisure Centre. Usage levels for the swimming pool even

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/correspondence\\_and\\_statistics\\_fo](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/correspondence_and_statistics_fo)

recorded higher levels than those for Hailsham Leisure Centre. Hailsham has a population of 21,000 plus the surrounding rural catchment area, but these statistics demonstrate that the central location of Uckfield's leisure provision and dual use site is integral to its success and popularity; serving the communities of Wealden each and every day.

### **Why are the 'wetside' facilities important?**

Discussions at our Annual Town meeting on 15 March 2023 centred around Uckfield Leisure Centre. Attendees were very concerned. When discussing the 'wetside' facilities, they felt swimming was a critical part of the school curriculum and were particularly anxious that the potential closure of the swimming pool could affect the education of our pupils and '*place pressure on other facilities in Wealden.*' Swim England state that "*since 1994, swimming and water safety has been a statutory element of the national curriculum for physical education in England. This means that every 11-year old child should leave primary school with the skills to keep themselves safe while enjoying swimming with friends and family.*" All primary schools have to provide this activity at Key Stage 1 and 2.

Uckfield Town has five primary schools and serves the 14 villages listed above. The Leisure Centre sits adjacent to Uckfield College which educates 1600 pupils supported by 120-150 staff. Closure would therefore flout national curriculum standards for primary age pupils. After seeing many decades of children learning to swim (an important and life-saving skill), if this centre were to close the greatest loss would without doubt be the swimming pool. Why should this change now, in 2023?

No information has been provided to explain how the 14 primary schools in the Uckfield catchment area would be supported by leisure facilities in the south (Hailsham) and north of the district (Crowborough). It is questionable how these facilities would be able to deliver a swimming pool timetable for their own residents, let alone residents from Uckfield's catchment area, with a packed timetable of school bookings from Monday through to Friday. The considerable journey times and additional costs incurred to put on transport would also work against the District and County's ambition to tackle climate change and for local authorities to spend money effectively. It would also be a step backward in terms of efficiency and modernisation.

The design of Uckfield's swimming pool is perfect for the younger age groups from toddlers up to school age, with safe water levels and a gentle gradient, which also suits those with learning difficulties or physical impairments. The design of the pool is likely to be the reason for the high footfall figures recorded and its attraction to local families. If the creche were to re-open, visitor numbers would be likely to increase further.

Uckfield Town Council invested in the Uckfield Leisure Centre and the 3G Pitch as did a number of businesses. Residents also contributed through their schools towards its establishment. For this reason, the town feel these facilities form part of Uckfield, and form a crucial part of the community.

We understand the site has had its difficulties, in particular historic maintenance issues within the pool area. We understand the substantial increase in utility costs, as we have also been affected, but it is hoped this will be a short-term issue. It is vital that a resource is maintained to support the community and to support residents, now. We know the likelihood that if this facility were to close, it would never return. Attendees at the Annual Town meeting were apprehensive about being forced to travel to either Crowborough or Hailsham for leisure provision, and they were worried about the additional costs to families accessing fuel or public transport. The travel distances would eat into valuable leisure time, add to traffic movements and reduce footfall when people struggled to access the facilities.

### **Why are the 'dryside' facilities important?**

This period of review is an opportunity for improvement and possible expansion. With adaptations to the

present building, usage could increase. We feel Wealden has the land and anticipated growth (*potential investment into the district*) to support the development of sport and leisure facilities needed for Uckfield.

If we examine the current 'dryside facilities,' the college buildings are newly upgraded, but yet very few athletic disciplines are available at the Leisure Centre or College. To cover athletic events in the right setting it is currently necessary to travel to Lewes, a round trip of some 18/20 miles to reach the nearest 400 metre track. When you consider the catchment area that Uckfield serves, and the age profile of that catchment area, we need to be supporting our young people and developing their sporting capabilities to become the next generation of athletes. Town Councillors are aware that the indoor sports facilities currently within Uckfield are limited and would not support the level of growth anticipated for the town.

### **The importance of Uckfield Leisure Centre**

As a Town Council we want to reiterate how important and integral this facility is within the town of Uckfield and its catchment area. This facility has to be looked at as a complete entity. It cannot be divided. This facility has been run as a complete service since being built which is the reason for its popularity and high usage levels. It enables access to both 'dryside' and 'wetside' facilities and the ability to stay within the same complex for a longer period of time. It's a safe space for all age groups and abilities. It supports those with varying health conditions, with classes being run for those of an older age or living with dementia. Private gym memberships are not accessible and inclusive to all, particularly from a financial basis.

Residents summarised the situation very clearly in March 2023; expressing the need for East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council to consider the cost-benefit analysis of keeping this facility open. They explained how the 'benefit' of the services provided onsite for Uckfield and the wider catchment area far outweighed the costs. They emphasised the benefits of supporting a child to learn to swim. In a parliamentary debate in December 2022, it was said that '*swimming brings in savings of £357million to the Healthcare system in its own right.*'<sup>2</sup> As many local authorities will know, a number of services never see the financial return required to cover the costs of running these facilities. It is the achievements obtained within these facilities, the personal and social development of young people and wider benefit to residents' mental and physical health and wellbeing – these are the reasons we are all here, working for or in the public sector. It's about the impact we can make to our residents' health. We want to support our community and we thrive on improving facilities for our residents. There will be a way to tackle these challenges. And, we can do this by working together.

Uckfield Town Council therefore urges East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council to cancel the termination of the \*current lease agreement and extend the agreement for a further 12 months. Not only to plan for the retention of this facility, but for its necessary improvement and enhancement...not just in building maintenance terms, but for the sports and leisure facilities provided.

On behalf of our town and communities, we ask for the exploration of opportunities within the Local Plan for improved and new facilities for the Uckfield catchment area through support from external investors, UK Government funding and developer contributions. Let's support the health of our communities, together.

Yours sincerely,



Town Clerk on behalf of  
Uckfield Town Council

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/parliamentary-debate-government-support-leisure-centres>