

# Abingdon area committee



Report of head of economy, leisure and property

Author: Trudy Godfrey

Telephone: 01235 540346

Textphone: 18001 01235 540346

E-mail: [trudy.godfrey@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:trudy.godfrey@southandvale.gov.uk)

Executive member responsible: Elaine Ware

Tel: 01793 783026

E-mail: [elaine.ware@whitehorsedc.gov.uk](mailto:elaine.ware@whitehorsedc.gov.uk)

To: Abingdon area committee

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## The Abbey project

### Recommendation

That the committee considers the Abbey project, particularly the proposed consultation process, and makes any recommendations to the cabinet members for parks and for economy, leisure and property for them to take into account when considering the consultation process.

### Purpose of report

1. Abbey Meadows is a strategically important riverside site that, with some investment, could significantly improve Abingdon's offer as a visitor destination. Officers carried out research and consultation to identify "*A vision for Abbey Meadows and Abbey Gardens that will build on the area's strength's as public open space and as a leisure and recreation destination.*" Officers have reviewed existing consultation evidence and have consulted a wide range of community organisations in Abingdon to identify ways to improve Abbey Meadows and Abbey Gardens.
  2. The purpose of this report is to present the research and consultation work that has been carried out on the Abbey project to date, and present three scenarios that have been identified through reviewing existing consultation evidence and through community consultations on the future development of the Abbey grounds.
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## Strategic objectives

3. This project will contribute towards the corporate objectives of “building the local economy” and “continue to invest to improve the viability and attractiveness of our towns”, in this case Abingdon.

## Background

4. Abbey Meadow is the Vale’s most-visited and busiest park and is one of Abingdon’s most visited attractions, and is particularly busy in the spring and summer months. The site comprises a play park, pitch and putt, tennis court, outdoor swimming pool and a riverside. In 2013, there were 11,420 swimmers at the outdoor pool, and typically visitor numbers range from 6,000 to 12,000 p.a. The total net cost to the public sector to run the pool was £54,000 in 2013 and there were just over 11,000 swimmers, which equates to a net cost to the public sector (after swimmer’s entry charges) of £4.80 per swim.
5. The Vale Council maintains Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadows and spends just under £60,000 every year on routine grounds maintenance for Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow.
6. The number of people using the facilities is declining over time:

NUMBERS ATTENDING		2011	2012	2013	2014
PITCH AND PUTT		435	284	351	<b>293</b>
CRAZY GOLF	Adults	396	235	236	<b>201</b>
CRAZY GOLF	Juniors	802	598	733	<b>454</b>
TENNIS COURT	(1 HR)	2	11	11	<b>3</b>
TENNIS COURT	(½ HR)	78	53	59	<b>61</b>
<b>Total users</b>		<b>1736</b>	<b>1181</b>	<b>1390</b>	<b>1012</b>

7. The Vale Council employs a seasonal attendant at a cost of around £7,000 p.a. and the total income received in 2014/15 was just short of £2,000. Income has been reducing generally overtime as the quality of the facilities has deteriorated.
  8. Abbey Gardens are designated as a scheduled ancient monument as the Abingdon Abbey, which dates back to the seventh century, once stood on the site.
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The layout of the outer wall to the abbey is marked on the ground with stone blocks, and interpretation boards in the gardens give an impression of how the site would have looked when the abbey was there.

9. The gardens comprise of two main areas; the formal garden area with flower beds, herbaceous borders, seating and an Italian walkway; and open parkland with a number of mature trees, an ornamental lake and a folly that stands near a statue of Queen Victoria. The lake is a haven for wildlife and is home to the nationally scarce water vole. The Abbey Gardens offers visitors a quiet retreat where they can relax, enjoy the flower displays, explore the archaeology or take part in informal recreational activities. In July 2013, Abbey Gardens was judged one of the best parks in the country and it was awarded Green Flag status for the fifth year in a row. The Green Flag is a national award that recognises parks that are well maintained and managed with excellent facilities. The gardens first scooped the Green Flag Award in 2009 following a five-year restoration project to transform the site to the way it looked in its Victorian heyday.

## **Development constraints**

10. A number of development constraints associated with the sites have been identified and are included at appendix 1 attached to this report.

## **Review of the existing consultation evidence**

11. Officers have reviewed consultation evidence that has been carried out in Abingdon in recent years, including: annual surveys of the users of Abbey Meadows and Abbey Gardens; The Choose Abingdon consultation work carried out over 2009 to 2012; South Abingdon residents consultation work in support of the South Abingdon residents community-led plan; and visitor surveys carried out by Hidden Britain in 2012. A summary of the existing consultation evidence is provided in appendix 2 attached to this report. In short, previous consultations support investment in Abbey Meadows to make it an even better place for visitors and residents. In particular, teenagers have been identified as a particular user group that would benefit from more activities and free access to sport and leisure facilities; in general, it would be desirable to have additional seating by the river; making more of the riverside location and the views; better playgrounds and equipment, and specifically an adventure playground for children aged 10+; open-air gym; picnic areas; and upgrades to paths to allow circular walks to be made.
12. At an internal officer meeting on 2 October, officers suggested that access and signage were key considerations and that additional play equipment should be focussed on those not presently catered for (i.e. children aged 10+) and highlighted that it should be a priority to get Blue Flag status for Abbey Meadows. Parents have fed back to officers a request that the splash area is fenced for health and safety reasons.

## **Additional consultation – October 2014 to February 2015**

13. Officers worked closely with Hidden Britain, a national charity specialising in community engagement and tourism projects to identify three scenarios to develop the Abbey Grounds.
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14. We initially consulted key user groups and stakeholders on the Abbey Gardens/Abbey Meadow site and consulted separately with young people at Fitzharris and Larkmead Schools. In doing so, we funnelled the potential options for the site into three overarching scenarios, and held a community consultation event on 4 November (30 different groups were represented), and asked community groups to identify and rank facilities in order of preference. This has led to the development of scenarios or options for further public consultation.

### **Community group workshop**

15. To promote a wider discussion, a community workshop was held on 4 November in the Guildhall. To reach as many people as possible, but also maintain workable numbers, all the known community groups in Abingdon were invited to send one or two representatives. Around sixty people attended the event, representing 30 different groups. The full list of those attending is shown in appendix 3 attached to this report.

16. Because of the number of people involved, the workshop was structured into specific activities and those of like-minded interest were grouped together to work on them. After explaining the context and constraints, we asked attendees to:

- outline their objectives for the site, and then prioritise those
- to evaluate and rank the existing assets in terms of importance
- to debate/discuss and rank individual facilities within the three scenarios
- to review and comment on all the options produced in the room
- to prioritise the elements and facilities within the scenarios.

### **General findings**

17. The following represent the key trends and issues that were articulated as important, no matter what the potential solution was:

- the site needs to appeal to a wide range of people - not specific niche groups
  - however, young people, families and especially older children were cited as key focal groups, as were visitors to Abingdon
  - the site needs both formal and informal provision - allowing both specific activities, but also dog walkers and casual walkers
  - access is key, both to reach and to get around - currently there are issues for disabled users and children in buggies/prams and in general with path surfaces and layout
  - toilet facilities are needed year round, whatever the solution
  - signage and awareness raising are vital, so potential users know about it
  - parking and access needs to be considered - current consensus suggests on-site provision is inadequate and although further options are available, the routes need to be improved
  - the character of the site needs to be maintained, whatever the solution
  - there are anxieties about personal safety, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour on the site and how this could impact future development
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- viability and ongoing sustainability needs to be considered before any new development - there is little appetite for investment without a robust plan to maintain it going forward.

### **Ranking the existing facilities**

18. The table below shows the combined ranking of current assets from the workshop and the young people's consultation:

<b>Facility</b>	<b>Rank</b>
<b>Splash area</b>	1
<b>Playground</b>	2
<b>Lake &amp; Gardens</b>	3
<b>River bank</b>	4
<b>Paths</b>	5
<b>Outdoor Pool</b>	6
<b>Pitch &amp; Putt</b>	7
<b>Crazy Golf</b>	8
<b>Tennis Courts</b>	9

19. Specific groups clearly have strong opinions on the various assets. However the following general conclusions can be drawn on the value of existing assets

- playground and splash areas are key current assets to retain and improve
- work needs to be included to protect and maintain the natural assets - the lake and Abbey Gardens and the river bank.
- users value the paths and access, but want to see better surfaces and more integrated network
- pool is valued by many, but clearly not at the expense of the preceding assets
- other assets are closely linked, so either need to benefit from extensive renovation or removal/change of use.

20. All users agreed that the overall objectives for the site are:

- extend the seasonal usage of the Abbey Meadows
- preserve and maintain Abbey Gardens
- increase the scope of the user groups accessing the site
- improve the appearance and maintenance of the sites
- expand the scope of activities within Abbey Meadows
- make the sites a key part of Abingdon's leisure offer
- ensure the riverside is a key draw for visitors.

### **SCENARIOS IDENTIFIED THROUGH CONSULTATION**

21. In order to help digest and make sense of the comments and ideas received, we developed three broad scenarios based on differing overarching purposes for the site. These are as follows:

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## **A - Focus on structured sport and recreation in Abbey Meadows**

22. This scenario largely retains the current assets and focuses on upgrading and improving them, as well as providing new ideas and elements to complement. The specific ideas *in order of priority* assigned to this vision includes:

- refurbish/upgrade pool and combine into a joint facility with cafe, toilets and include green energy
- open up the pool area to integrate with surrounding assets (splash area etc)
- expand and enhance current play area for younger children
- multi-use games area on tennis court site
- extend and enhance splash area.

## **B - Focus on tourism and leisure in Abbey Meadows**

23. This scenario requires the removal of redundant assets and replacement with those more conducive to a less formal approach, allowing interaction and use at any time by numerous groups. The specific ideas *in order of priority* assigned to this vision includes:

- cafe/restaurant on pool site (remove pool) - to include wi-fi, toilets and visitor information
- expand and enhance current play area for younger children
- adventure play for older children (including zipwires / ropes etc)
- picnic area/bbqs (including shelters)
- bandstand or performance space in Abbey Meadows
- mobile ice rink or seasonal events.

## **C - Focus on informal use of green space in Abbey Meadows**

24. This scenario also requires the removal of redundant assets, but advocates replacement with either re-landscaped natural features or low key facilities that enable informal use of the green space. The specific ideas *in order of priority* assigned to this vision includes:

- improved surface to paths and routes (multi-use enabling circular walks)
  - public art (interactive if possible or combined with seating)
  - disabled access (landing stage and re-graded access points and paths)
  - green gym and adult exercise equipment
  - pop-up cafe
  - performance or event space in Abbey Meadows
  - natural / wildlife areas with interpretation, possibly sensory gardens
  - expand and enhance childrens' play areas
  - bandstand in Abbey Gardens
  - improved interpretation in Abbey Gardens.
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25. In relation to all the scenarios, council officers question the commercial viability of continuing to operate pitch and putt, crazy golf and outdoor tennis courts. The table in paragraph six illustrates the very low usage of these facilities. This is something that can be given further consideration once the Vale Council has agreed the overall focus for improvements.

## **Next Steps**

26. Following the consultation outlined above, the following steps are being undertaken:

- itemise the proposed scenarios and obtain indicative costs, and ensure that proposals are commercially viable
- using the results as a guide, the next step is to work with quantity surveyors and other experts (both within and external to the Vale Council) to cost out the options within the three scenarios and recommend which elements are pursued (given the budgetary and other constraints on the site)
- a report will go to cabinet for it to consider and approve the consultation exercise
- consultation with statutory bodies
  - based on the finalised options - further consultation needs to be undertaken with statutory bodies, e.g. planning, Environment Agency, English Heritage, HLF, Sport England etc in order to ensure all options are feasible and possible before releasing to public consultation
  - finalise and develop concept designs for the three scenarios
  - on completion of statutory consultation, the finalised designs and concepts will be produced visually prior to public consultation
  - public consultation.

## **PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

27. Running from January to February 2015 the three design 'scenarios' or options will be released to the public who will be asked to vote on their preferred option. Officers will take a report to scrutiny committee as a consultee, during the consultation phase.

28. The public consultation will be open to all Vale residents, as the Abbey Grounds are used by residents across the Vale. The public consultation will comprise:

- online consultation
- physical voting through a period of display in the Abingdon community shop during one week in February
- paper versions of the consultation will be available and disseminated - how do councillors think we can best reach 'hardest to reach' members of the public?

29. Results, once collated, will be released publicly, most likely in March 2015. The scenario receiving the most votes will be the one taken forward to delivery phase, where practically possible.

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## Financial implications

30. Cabinet members have asked officers to submit a discretionary capital growth bid of £0.5 million to allow the capital improvements to be made. This is the working budget that the quantity surveyor and architect are working to. There may be revenue budget consequences depending on the option that is chosen. For instance, we may be able to reduce our revenue costs by some £7,000 if we no longer need a leisure operative in Abbey Meadows collecting fees for the crazy gold and tennis during the summer holidays.
31. The revenue budget implications will be known, in full after the public consultation is complete, and detailed costs have been received. At this time officers will need to review the budget position and either submit revenue growth bids or offer up savings.

## Legal Implications

32. As mentioned below in appendix 1, there are some legal issues that need to be taken into account when deciding which scenario is most suitable, and also which may need to be addressed before a plan is recommended:
- The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) will need to give its approval to any scheme, although its main focus will be on Abbey Gardens and the area around the existing recreational area. These were the main areas that received grant funding and consequently HLF needs to give its consent to any alterations to existing layouts. The recreational area is of lesser importance as HLF provided little direct funding for any improvements to this area and, therefore, any constraints on development of Abbey Meadows would be unlikely.
  - There is a covenant affecting Abbey Meadows (again as mentioned in appendix 1), the benefit of which is held by the Master and Governors of the Hospital of Christ of Abingdon ("the Charity"). This prevents the erection of any building or other structure on Abbey Meadows, other than such buildings or structures as may be ancillary to the intended use of the land as a public open space for recreational purposes. As all the schemes do not contemplate any building other than for ancillary purposes, this covenant should not be breached. However, it is recommended that any development plans should be communicated to the charity to ensure that no problems arise at a later date.
  - There is a water pipe owned by Thames Water on the Abbey Meadows site, which runs around the edges of the site from the river. There are the usual covenants not to build over this or plant any trees within a certain distance of the pipe. There should not be an issue as long as the location of this pipe is taken into account in any development. Thames Water will have a plan of the location, which can be used for consultation on any development of the waterside area
  - The existing car parking area must continue to be used as a car park.
33. In conclusion, as long as the above matters are taken into account in terms of the extent of the proposed development, and consultations with the appropriate bodies are done at any early stage, the legal risks of development at Abbey Meadows as outlined in this report should be minimal.
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## **Risks**

34. The main risk is over deliverability of the improvements, and specifically whether the improvements will be deliverable within time and within budget. We have engaged professionals (quantity surveyor and architect) to minimise these risks.

## **Conclusion**

35. The committee is invited to:

- note the research to date, and the three scenarios with associated facilities that have been ranked in order of preference by 30 different community groups and 60 young people at Fitzharrys and Larkmead Schools
  - make any recommendations to the cabinet members for parks and for economy, leisure and property for them to take into account when considering the consultation process
  - advise officers on the best ways of reaching the hardest to reach members of the community to ensure that the voting process is as democratic as possible.
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## Appendix 1

### Development constraints

36. A number of development constraints associated with the sites have been identified and are included at Appendix 2. , including the following:

- **conservation area:** Abbey Meadows and Abbey Gardens are in a conservation area, which protects the special architectural and historic interests of the area
  - **heritage assets:** most of Abbey Garden has scheduled ancient monument status as Abingdon Abbey once stood on the site
  - **floodzone** – the development site floods regularly and is categorised as either floodzone 2 or 3, and this will impact on the type and location of development.
  - **landfilled gravel extraction site** - Abbey Meadow previously formed part of a gravel extraction site, which has been landfilled, but parts of the site suffer from subsidence. The areas that are worst affected include the tennis courts and pitch and putt. This does not preclude any new development, but further ground investigations at the specific locations for any new development will need to be undertaken to determine what, if any, mitigation measures are needed.
  - **restrictive covenants** – Abbey Meadows is subject to a restrictive covenant that prevents the erection of any building or structure other than such buildings that are ancillary to the intended use of the land as public open space for recreational purposes.
  - **Thames Water** own a water pipe on the Abbey Meadows site, which runs around the edges of the site from the river. There are covenants not to build over this or plant any trees within a certain distance of the pipe. There should not be an issue as long as the location of this pipe is taken into account in any development. Thames Water will have a plan of the location which can be used for consultation on any development of the waterside area
  - **grant funding conditions** – the Vale Council received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2002, and the areas funded by the grant were extensive, including Abbey Gardens and the children’s play area. We would need to consult HLF on proposed changes, and it is unlikely to give its consent to any material alterations to the areas that were improved in 2002.
  - **ecology** - ecological issues may arise depending on the proximity to the river
  - **moorings** - a moorings policy is currently being reviewed by the Vale Council, which will consider the type of enforcement actions to take. This is likely to include charging for overnight moorings, which are free at present, in order to pay for enforcement.
  - **funding** – officers have submitted a discretionary capital growth bid to improve the area. It may also be possible to use private sector capital, and to apply for grants from other bodies, depending on what is proposed.
  - **Sport England** – it will need to be consulted about the loss of any sporting facility.
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## **Appendix 2 – Feedback from previous Abingdon-based consultations**

### **Feedback from users of Abingdon Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens**

The parks team gather feedback from the visitors to the park each year. Generally satisfaction with Abbey Gardens is very high, with visitors providing very positive feedback that they are beautiful, quiet gardens with space to picnic and relax. Feedback from Abbey Meadows is less favourable, and in recent years comments have provided quite a high level of dissatisfaction with public toilets, the tennis courts and crazy golf which are now in a poor state of repair.

### **Choose Abingdon Partnership public consultation 2009-2012**

Choose Abingdon Partnership (CHAP) undertook large-scale public consultation exercises to identify Abingdon's strengths and weaknesses and to identify project ideas that would help enhance town centre vitality and improve linkages between the town and the river.

Specifically, CHAP Strategy and Action Plan for 2012 onwards identified the following priorities:

- Lack of 'family' things to do within Abingdon
- Lack of music & entertainment
- Lack of a single major visitor attraction
- Low footfall in town centre
- Poor evening 'offer'
- Poor access and signage from the centre of town

CHAP Strategy and Action Plan for 2012 onwards identified the following projects:

- Hydro scheme with visitor centre (the hydro scheme is likely to proceed, but plans for the visitor centre have been put on hold)
- Need to assess and improve leisure offer at Abbey Meadows
- Larger redevelopment of Abbey Meadow as leisure offering
- Assess and improve leisure offer far side of river
- Summer Festival (one or two week package and main event)
- Riverside Tourist Information point for summer season
- Signage and interpretation linking river to town

The need to assess and improve the leisure offer at Abbey Meadows was given a very high weighting in the CHAP Strategy.

### **"The Abingdon Visitor Survey, 2012" by Hidden Britain**

Hidden Britain undertook over 200 face to face visitors in Abingdon at a range of different locations within the town and at the riverside between May and July 2012. They found that over half of visitors were aged over 56 years. This highlights a need to attract younger visitors to the town.

The report highlights Abingdon's USP as its setting on the river and its historic character are key features within its visitor economy, offer and experience and should be placed front and centre within any promotional or developmental strategy taken forward. However there is the need to implement a clear and consistent strategy and

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implementation model to direct visitor and tourism development. New developments, infrastructure and facilities should be prioritised to complement and improve the Abingdon visitor offer.

There were some basic areas where Abingdon did not do so well with the following requiring specific attention:

- Toilets in very poor condition and seasonal opening
- High relative proportion of vacant shops in key areas
- Signage pointing in wrong direction, and better signage between the river and town
- Questionable location of map boards.
- Literature available on the town was confused and duplicated itself
- Lack of Sunday or evening opening for many of the retail outlets

The public toilets issue should be addressed as a key priority, these facilities are key to the visitor experience, and a poor experience is likely to be a memorable one even if the rest of the visit has been positive. In essence the details do matter “Sense of destination – the extent to which it has met a visitor’s needs and made a strong and positive impression – is therefore vital to secure repeat trade and sustainable economic development.” In tandem with toilets is the upkeep of the public realm. Abingdon scored very highly for the physical appearance of the town, its buildings, green space and street furniture, and this should be maintained going forward as it again it is an important detail that impacts on the visitor experience.

Abingdon is a little lower than anticipated on what could be termed visitor attractions and activities with only 17 business or organisations providing these services. Given the nature of the destination, encouragement or development of sites and activities of visitor interest would be advantageous in the future. However Abingdon does perform very well once we add in the interpretive activities that make the most of its natural and historical features (the 20 promoted routes and the various events in particular). But this can always be expanded and built upon and work should be undertaken to ensure these activities are well publicised and the content not lost (or in the case of the promoted routes made available clearly to visitors either online in centrally organised place or visibly in situ).

A number of ‘themes’ emerged from the research in terms of comments supplied by visitors as to what improvements they would like to see in Abingdon. These included:-

1. Retail offer – improve the range and quality of shopping
2. Improving signage – particularly pedestrian signage and improvements between the town and the river
3. Traffic and transport was a key problem for many people, almost exclusively relating to the congestion and traffic flow caused by the one-way system.
4. Improvements to the river were mentioned many times, with specific requests for more improved facilities by the river (food, toilets and seating) as well as improvements to the riverside path and better signage and promotion of the lock and riverside walks.

South Abingdon residents developed a questionnaire, in the context of their Community-led plan which was not taken forward to completion, but several hundred responses were received when the questionnaire was issued in 2011/12. These responses that related to the Abbey Meadows / Abbey Gardens area were summarised by the shared corporate projects officer as:-

- More activities for teenagers to do
- Seating by the river
- Improving the views
- Better playgrounds and equipment, and specifically a 5-12 year old adventure playground
- An open-air gym
- Picnic areas
- Circular walks
- Basketball Court and keep-fit classes or facilities
- More seating by the river
- Develop riverside park (make better use of space & area: nature walks, play park & keep fit circuit.)

#### **Internal workshop with Vale Council staff**

An internal workshop was held on 2 October 2014, and officers from most of the service areas attended. Some of the ideas and suggestions for improvements to the Abbey grounds included:-

- better facilities for older children and teenagers
  - Improved seating, picnic areas and bins
  - Café / restaurant
  - BBQ pits
  - Improved signage between the river and the town
  - Bandstand or amphitheatre – better events space
  - Circular walking routes
  - Poetry trail
  - Longer summer season for pool and water feature
  - Arts centre
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### **Appendix 3**

#### **Community Groups attending the 4 Nov event**

Abbey Brass  
Abbey Close resident  
ABC Tots  
Abingdon artists  
Abingdon Artists & Ox Art Groups  
Abingdon Carbon Cutters  
Abingdon Flower Club  
Abingdon Hydro  
Abingdon Museum  
Abingdon Naturalist Society  
Abingdon Town Band  
Abingdon Town Council  
Air Cadets  
Bid Team  
Carbon Cutters  
Choose Abingdon Partnership  
Christ's Hospital of Abingdon  
Drama Group  
Friends of Abingdon  
Friends of Abingdon Outdoor Pool  
NCT Abingdon  
Oxfordshire Arts  
Pasiol Play  
Preston Road Community Centre  
Silver Band  
South Abingdon Resident Plan  
St Helens Baby & toddler group  
VWHDC  
Womens Institute

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