



STRATEGIC PLAN

Aspire 2 Strategic Plan

2025 – 2029

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Purpose

VISION

To ensure that all children in South Reading have opportunities to access a wide range of enrichment activities that enable them to develop skills that are essential to leading happy, fulfilled and successful lives.

MISSION

To work collaboratively with funders, businesses and community organisations to secure sufficient resources to deliver a full range of enrichment programs.

Goals

We aim to develop an ongoing programme of affordable activities and opportunities aimed at addressing the impact of social, financial and cultural disadvantage by:

- increasing social mobility
- building self-awareness and resilience
- improving self-esteem
- increasing the ability to make informed decisions

Drawing from the past

Background and history

Aspire 2 was established as a registered charity in 2007 when the government's Excellence in Cities funding ended and school leaders wanted to ensure the sustainability of enrichment activities for children attending the 11 collaborating schools which form the Whitley Excellence Cluster (WEC).

Aspire2 is proud to be celebrating 20 years of impact in the Whitley community this year. Over the past two decades, the organisation has raised more than £1.2 million to support its work with children, young people and families. Throughout this time, Aspire2 has consistently delivered a programme of activities designed to develop positive behaviours, strengthen social and emotional capabilities, and build essential life skills.

2007

Established as a
charity

20 yrs

Of impact in
Whitley

£1.2m+

Raised to support
our work

11

Collaborating WEC
schools

Beneficiaries

We focus on the children in South Reading, in particular the area of Whitley, which is known as the area in Reading with one of the highest levels of disadvantage (Index of Multiple Deprivation, IMD 2019).

Approximately 5,300 children from South Reading attend the following 11 schools. During 2018–19 some 3,097 (74%) of eligible children attended an Aspire2 funded school trip. *(NB: to update.)*

The schools attended by our current beneficiaries include:

- Blagdon Nursery
- Christ the King Primary School
- Geoffrey Field Infant School
- Geoffrey Field Junior School
- New Christ Church Primary School
- Palmer Academy (primary)
- The Ridgeway Primary School
- Whitley Park Primary School
- Reading Girls School (secondary)
- Hartland High (secondary)
- The Avenue Special School (Tilehurst based but draws pupils from South Reading and was originally located in South Reading when WEC and Aspire2 were formed, for pupils aged 2 to 19)

Considering the future

Needs analysis

In terms of enrichment opportunities for children and young people in our area of concern (Whitley), there are four key pillars of need (see Appendix 1 for more detail).

1 · Lack of facility

There are limited opportunities for children to meet, play and socialise in Whitley, as evidenced in many research reports. Lack of financial means, low parental engagement, and the notion that outside spaces are dangerous for children to use have all contributed to increasing numbers of children with ‘nowhere to go, nothing to do’, contributing to a lack of life skills, aspirations and awareness of opportunity.

2 · Poverty and disadvantage

Reading is a town of contrasts, with some very wealthy areas and some, like Whitley, that are in the most deprived deciles in the country. Children growing up in these areas may face social, financial and cultural barriers to taking part in enrichment activities that are enjoyed as a matter of course by children in nearby wealthier neighbourhoods.

3 · School provision

Schools are facing increasing pressures, both financially and in meeting the academic targets that influence their position in national league tables. As a result, the focus is often placed firmly on classroom-based learning, leaving limited time, space and resources for enrichment activities that play a vital role in children's wider development. We also know that many schools are struggling with access to suitable space, particularly safe and usable outdoor areas.

This challenge is especially significant in communities such as Whitley, where many children are less likely to have regular access to outdoor spaces, organised activities or sports outside of school. For families facing financial pressures, schools are often the primary place where children can experience these activities. Without additional support, pupils in more deprived areas risk missing out on experiences that help build confidence, resilience, teamwork and aspiration.

4 · Life skills

Employers are increasingly looking for life skills and experiences alongside exam results, and candidates who offer skills such as confidence, communication, leadership and resilience are more likely to find success in employment and in life. Independent schools are well known for instilling these skills in their pupils, however children in low income families and schools in deprived areas do not benefit from activities that nurture these essential life skills.

Principles of provision

Research shows that extra-curricular and non-formal learning opportunities have a significant impact on the key areas; this aspect is key to Aspire2's vision. Aspire2 predominantly funds activities beyond the national curriculum; we also have flexibility due to funding grants to fund curriculum-supporting activities. It is our ambition that all children should receive some benefit, but not all provision will be evenly allocated to all children.

Environment analysis

Whitley and Church have 5 neighbourhoods in the top 20% (IMD 2025). All of these neighbourhoods plus two additional neighbourhoods in Church Ward — 7 in total — are in the top 10% for Education, Skills and Training. One of these is in the top 1% of deprivation for Education, Skills and Training (Index of Multiple Deprivation, IMD 2025).

Partners

Aspire2 works with a range of partners to deliver our projects, and is always seeking to develop new partnerships. To date, partners have included:

- Wellington College
- The University of Reading
- The Earley Charity
- Reading Borough Council
- Youth Music
- Reading Cultural Education Partnership
- Connect Reading
- Reading Rep
- The Rock Academy
- Rabble
- John Sykes Foundation
- Reading Voluntary Action
- Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA)
- Beale Park
- Reading Rotary Clubs
- Reading District Angling Association
- Holy Brook Associates
- Pangbourne College
- JB Music Productions
- Berkshire Music Trust
- Bradfield College
- Kindermusik
- Reading Football Club
- Igniting Writing

Strategic aims

Building on our success, Aspire2 now wants to build upon its current portfolio of extra-curricular enrichment opportunities, such as cross school competitions, trips and family events — those non-statutory but vital educational activities such as after-school activities and trips that, because of recent budgetary pressures, schools have found it increasingly difficult to provide. To ensure that cycles of inter-generational inequality are broken, we want to ensure that our youngsters do not get left behind due to lack of choice and opportunity. Our strategic aim is to expand the horizons of the people and families of Whitley.

As a small charity, our annual development needs core focus. Our key areas of focus over the next three years are set out in our development focus plan.



✓

Consolidate and continue to enhance activities
across all school year groups.

Learn • Engage • Thrive

Delivering the goals

Impact analysis

It is always challenging to measure impact in terms of SROI (Social Return On Investment), however there is comprehensive research to demonstrate the impact of the sort of activities Aspire2 provides for local children and families. Moving forward, strategies are being developed to monitor feedback and assess impact for future activities, so reporting can be improved and developed.

Published research demonstrating the impact of enrichment activities shows impact in three key areas (see Appendix 2 for more details):

Happiness & aspiration

Being involved in enrichment and extra-curricular activities is proven to have a positive effect on children's happiness and mental wellbeing. Having hobbies and attending activities outside the main school curriculum reduces screen time, and promotes higher levels of optimism and satisfaction, whilst also lowering symptoms of anxiety and depression. Although there is no lack of aspiration amongst younger children in deprived areas of Reading, there is a sense that as they grow up these aspirations shrink, and the effect of poverty starts to limit young people's ambition. Given the increasing rates of poor mental well-being amongst children, happiness promotion is a key issue.

Positive educational outcomes

Taking part in extra-curricular activities can have a positive benefit on children's educational achievement, with raised expectations and aspirations leading to an improvement in attendance, study skills and ability to learn. There is much cross-fertilisation between skills needed for extra-curricular activities and those needed in school — for example, mathematical skills are key for many sports, and for learning a musical instrument. Children who take part in extra-curricular activities are also more likely to consider higher education. Moving forward, the link between Aspire2 activities and educational outcomes is something we will work with schools to monitor.

Development of key life skills

Increasing key life skills is a more important factor than exam results for employers when recruiting. The CBI annual education and skills survey (2019) found most employers (45%) ranked aptitude and readiness for work as the most important factor they consider when recruiting school and college leavers. Additionally, 60% of employers said they rate broader skills such as resilience, communication, and problem-solving among their top three priorities when recruiting. The development of these skills is accelerated and improved through enrichment, and the state sector (especially in deprived areas) currently lags far behind independent schools in terms of nurturing these skills, primarily due to the discrepancy in enrichment activities and opportunities outside the main school curriculum.

Appendix 1 — Analysis of need

Lack of facility

- 16% of young people mentioned a lack of things to do and a lack of facilities in Reading. (*Growing up in Reading report, RVA, March 2021*)
- 37% wanted more things to do and places to go. (*Growing up in Reading report, RVA, March 2021*)
- ‘[There is a] lack of opportunities for young people to have safe spaces and trusted adults [in Whitley].’ (*New Directions College & Berkshire Youth Place Based Pilot, November 2024*)
- Accessibility to extra-curricular activities in Whitley is increased if they are local, free and promoted via the school. Collaboration with schools would help with targeting the young people who might benefit the most. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Given the societal shift in parental perceptions of public spaces, it is likely that demand for organised clubs and societies perceived to offer a ‘safe space’ for children will have risen. As these often carry financial cost, this raises important questions of equity and social justice if only those children whose parents can afford it can access them. (*An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- Almost half of the teenagers we interviewed in 2018 did not go to an extra-curricular club. Of those who did, most were sports-related, but a desire for creative activities and career-related clubs was also expressed. (*The Relevance of Higher Education in Recent Aspiration Research in South Reading, Whitley Researchers, February 2019*)
- A survey of 7,000 teachers by Teacher Tapp indicates that in a ‘normal’ year 75% of teachers run some kind of extra-curricular activity in schools. At the start of the 2020/21 academic year, this figure had fallen to only 25%. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, The Centre for Education and Youth, October 2021*)
- UK sports clubs have lost 60% of their members, with 96% of football clubs having experienced reduced income. A third of youth music groups have lower enrolment than in previous years. This lack of access is particularly acute for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, The Centre for Education and Youth, October 2021*)

Poverty and deprivation

- 31.6% of children are at risk of living in poverty. (*Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Oct 2025*)
- 32.9% of children are receiving free school meals. (*Spring School Census 2025–2026*)
- One secondary school has 43.8% pupil premium pupils. (*Spring School Census 2025–2026*)
- Opportunities to participate are driven by household income, school attended, gender, ethnicity and geographic location. Household income is by far the most important factor, with children from the poorest households much less likely to take part — especially in music classes and sport. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- Across every type of extra-curricular activity, as household income declined, so too did participation. A crucial factor driving this socio-economic gap is the cost of activities, especially those with the highest upfront costs. For many families, even those with average incomes, these costs are too much to bear, especially with more than one child. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- 98% of middle-class children participate in enrichment activities, with 79% taking part in three or more per week. By contrast, 74% of working-class children are involved in two or fewer activities per week, with 22% participating in none at all. (*Enriching Children, Institutionalizing Childhood?, Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014*)
- Middle-class children have greater access to enrichment activities than their working-class counterparts both in school (70% vs. 56%) and, even more starkly, off school premises (95% vs. 52%). (*Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014*)
- Church Ward (in Whitley) is the most deprived ward in Reading, with education and income affecting children being key issues. One LSOA is in the bottom 1% in the country for Education, Skills and Training. The ward has a proportionally younger population, with 21.4% aged 0–15. (*Whitley for Real project 2017, Brown & Ryall*)
- 24.9% of families in Church and 19.9% in Whitley are in low income families (in receipt of Child Tax Credit), compared to 22% nationally. (*Department of Work & Pensions 23/24*)
- 7 out of 10 areas in the most deprived decile for education, skills and training, including 2 areas in the 2% most deprived in England. (*English Indices of Deprivation 2025*)
- This parish ranks 1308 out of 12382, making it amongst the most deprived in the country. (*Reading: St Agnes with St Paul and St Barnabas — Church Urban Fund report*)
- Average pupil premium level is 27%; a total of 1,189 children in Whitley qualify for free school meals. (*DfE Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2020/21*)
- There are vast disparities in access to non-formal learning between young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers. Disadvantaged students are also more vulnerable to obesity, mental health issues, youth violence, low educational attainment and poor transitions into post-18 education, training and employment. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, CfEY, October 2021*)

School provision

- 55% were not convinced the school is providing them with the skills they need for the future — 39% of school parents and 60% of secondary school teachers agree. Teachers and parents particularly want more instruction in life skills. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Schools in more disadvantaged areas tend to have larger class sizes and fewer well-qualified and experienced teachers, which often translates into a more limited offer of extra-curricular activities. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- 86% of middle-class and 88% of working-class parents think school is a good place to provide enrichment activities, viewing schools as a 'safe environment' for their primary-aged children. (*Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014*)
- There are clear benefits to closer partnership-working between schools and external non-formal learning providers. This requires leadership, coordination and sharing of best practice at a strategic level. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, CfEY, October 2021*)

Life skills (soft / interpersonal skills)

- 50% of parents said lack of confidence held their children back. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Research found a correlation between higher levels of some soft skills (readiness to learn, problem-solving, and planning skills) and upward social mobility, defined as an individual having higher educational attainment than their parents. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- When asked what holds their child back generally, the most common response was 'lack of confidence' (50% of parents). Confidence can grow with small successes as problems are confronted and overcome, and in the presence of supportive relationships. (*Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014*)

Appendix 2 — Evidence of impact

Happiness & aspiration

- 100% of children at The Palmer Academy [primary school in Whitley] said that they had aspirations. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- ‘When you are very young you are full of big ideas, but as you grow up you lose them.’ — Young Whitley Researchers. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- 20% of students mentioned that their happiness was affected by being able to have fun in school; fun activities, special events and trips outside of school. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Young people (and their parents) were happier about school life when the young person was involved in a club outside of normal school lessons. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Students who were happy at school were more likely to talk of a bright future. Those going to clubs found the future brighter. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- The issue of young people having low aspirations was a recurring theme throughout the interview process (47%), and was sometimes seen as a product of poverty. People were keen to broaden horizons, give greater opportunities and increase hope. (*Research Report into the needs of the Youth and Community of Whitley, Fusion Youth & Community, February 2015*)
- As we consider the young people of Whitley, it is vital that we do not buy into their low aspirations or those of those around them. Whatever we offer, we need to be consistent and to empower them. Young people do not need entertaining or babysitting — they need to be set free to change their world. (*Fusion Youth & Community, February 2015*)
- Teens, especially girls, have better mental health when they spend more time in extra-curricular activities and less time in front of screens. (*University of British Columbia, Nov 2020*)
- Spending less than two hours per day of recreational screen time was associated with higher life satisfaction and optimism, and lower anxiety and depressive symptoms. (*University of British Columbia, Nov 2020*)
- Extra-curricular participation was associated with better mental health outcomes. (*University of British Columbia, Nov 2020*)
- Non-formal learning has consistently been shown to improve young people’s mental health, leading to higher levels of optimism and reduced loneliness. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, CfEY, October 2021*)

Positive educational outcomes

- Being in clubs is associated with more positive outcomes, although almost half of the teens interviewed were not linked to extra-curricular activities. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- ‘Extra-curricular activities boost young people’s confidence to interact socially with others; extend their social networks; and provide them with new skills and abilities.’ (*An unequal playing field — GOV.UK*)
- Extra-curricular clubs are another way of giving adolescents positive contact time with adults. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Extra-curricular activities that provide hands-on learning experience also reveal pathways forwards; young people are inspired and led by the positive role models of visitors, guest speakers and mentors. (*Aspiration in Whitley report, August 2018*)
- Young people who engage in an additional sport more than others from similar backgrounds are 10% more likely to aspire to pursue further education. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- Youth who attend music classes regularly are almost 40% more likely to aspire to pursue further education. (*An unequal playing field, M Donnelly, 2019*)
- Children who attended school clubs tended to be happier at school, more likely to aspire to higher education and more positive about their future generally. (*The Relevance of Higher Education, Whitley Researchers, February 2019*)
- Teachers and parents feel that having fewer opportunities for engagement in extra-curricular activities has been an issue: 84% among teachers and 68% among parents; two in three children (66%) also recognise this as a consequence of the pandemic. (*Enriching Education Recovery report, CfEY, October 2021*)

Development of key life skills

- Soft skills have been found to be positively associated with workers' occupational status and higher salaries, and significantly impact educational attainment. (*An unequal playing field*, M Donnelly, 2019)
- Analysis of UK job adverts suggests formal credential requirements are far less present than previously assumed; equality in participation in non-formal or extra-curricular learning becomes a potential vehicle for greater intergenerational social mobility. (*An unequal playing field*, M Donnelly, 2019)
- Analysis of PIAAC data found a correlation between higher levels of soft skills (readiness to learn, problem-solving, and planning) and upward social mobility. (*An unequal playing field*, M Donnelly, 2019)
- Extra-curricular activities form part of the mechanisms by which advantaged groups maintain their positions, likely to become even more important as the graduate population increases and competition intensifies — suggesting they may be one policy solution to address social mobility. (*An unequal playing field*, M Donnelly, 2019)
- In 2019, 92% of talent professionals and hiring managers agreed that candidates with strong soft skills are increasingly important. (*Enriching Education Recovery report*, CfEY, October 2021)
- Life and social skills training prevents youth violence, as does sport, art and mentoring. (*Enriching Education Recovery report*, CfEY, October 2021)

Appendix 3 — Why Whitley?

Whitley has a current population of 24,747 (2024 ONS estimates), of which 21.4% are under the age of 15.

Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 for Whitley

Domain	Finding
Overall score	12.3% of households fall into the most deprived areas nationally (Decile 1 — top 10%), with 28.6% in Deciles 2, 3 and 4 respectively.
Education, training & skills	43% of the population fall into the most deprived (Decile 1), with 43% in Decile 2 and 14% in Decile 3.
Barriers to housing & services	29% fall in the top decile for physical and financial barriers to housing, with 57% in Decile 2 and 14% in Decile 4.

The table below shows how the Whitley and Church wards rank nationally across the domains of deprivation, expressed as the percentile band each falls into (local authorities report it this way, since percentiles can confuse people):

Domain	National ranking
Income	Top 10% most deprived
Employment	Top 10% most deprived
Education, skills & training	Top 10% most deprived
Health & disability	Top 10–20% most deprived
Crime	Top 10–30% most deprived
Barriers to housing & services	Top 20–40% most deprived
Living environment	Top 20–40% most deprived

Using data from deprivation.communities.gov.uk/about-your-neighbourhood

Appendix 4 — Evaluations

Recent projects

University visit

Parliament visit

Poetry competition

Public speaking competition

Beale Park trip

Pantomime trip

Music mentoring

EYFS music sessions

Wellington College fund

Quiz night

Aspire2 development day

Fishing sessions

Whitley carnival

Minibuses

Oakwood climbing session

Feedback from our recent projects from staff and pupils of the Whitley Schools

“This event is the kind of thing that will stick in the minds of the pupils and their teachers long from now, and could help spur on the writing and performance talents to keep growing.”

— Alex Baker, Igniting Writing

“We have loved being involved in this for the last few years. Charlotte is fantastic and we find that the children get more out of these sessions not only because she is a musical specialist but because it isn’t the adult they are always with!!”

April Chapman, Nursery Teacher — Geoffrey Field Infant School

“We are very grateful for all that is on offer for our children and parents comment on the range of activities which without your help we would not be able to run. Communication with school is good and if we have questions you are great at coming back with the answers. The fact that you have the expertise to source grants to fund the extra curricular trips is fantastic because I could never fit that in with the day job! Very much appreciated by all at The Ridgeway.”

“Improved social skills, emotional regulation and musical knowledge and understanding.”

Zoe Dean, Headteacher — Geoffrey Field Infant School

“The activities we are offered are wonderful to enrich the lives of the students and we greatly appreciate the support.”

Norah Eggar, Headteacher — The Ridgeway Primary School

“The mini buses are a real asset to the WEC schools. Without them we would not be able to run the trips that we do in an affordable way for our families as the cost of a larger coach is too much.”

Rebecca Brown, Headteacher — Geoffrey Field Junior School

“It was really helpful being able to use the minibuses as this kept the cost of the trip down to a real minimum. The children got so much from the day and were so excited to see animals that they normally never get a chance to see.”

“I loved seeing the birds, they were so colourful.”

Ali Crooks, Headteacher & children — New Christ Church