

Minutes of the meeting of the **DOVER LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Thursday, 31 March 2016 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor T J Bartlett

Councillors: P M Beresford
N J Collor
M D Conolly
Mr P Ward

Also present: Councillor R J Frost
Councillor G Rapley
Councillor M J Ovenden

Officers: Director of Environment and Corporate Assets
Principal Infrastructure and Delivery Officer
Principal Community and Leisure Officer
Democratic Support Officer

1 APOLOGIES

It was noted that there were no apologies for absence.

2 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that there were no substitute members.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was noted that there were no declarations of interest.

4 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Group considered the draft Terms of Reference.

It was agreed that they should be accepted and kept under review as the project progressed.

5 OVERVIEW OF THE DOVER LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT

Members were reminded that, at its meeting held in March 2015, Cabinet had agreed that a review should be undertaken of the District's indoor sports and leisure facilities, prompted by Dover's ageing leisure centre. A consultant, The Sports Consultancy, had been appointed in July to undertake this review.

Working with Sport England from the outset, Officers had briefed the consultants to explore the inclusion of a range of facilities in a new leisure centre, including squash courts, sports halls, an indoor swimming-pool, dance/aerobics studios, health and fitness suites, etc. Sport England's approach had been followed wherever possible, and a technical and detailed analysis had been undertaken to identify the right mix of facilities for the District's current and projected populations. Information gathered during the review had also informed the Council's Indoor Sports Facility Strategy

(ISFS), consultation on which was due to finish on 6 May. A report would then be presented to Cabinet outlining the representations received.

The consultants had reached a number of conclusions in respect of the leisure centre. If the Council were to do nothing, it was estimated that maintaining the existing building would cost around £2 million over 3 years. This was unlikely to provide longevity for the building and significant problems would remain. Whilst refurbishment could potentially cost less than replacement, the consultants had advised against this as it could involve significant expenditure, yet result in a building whose lifespan had not been significantly extended. The recommended option was to build a new centre entirely, in which case one of the key considerations would be achieving the right mix of facilities in order to ensure that it met the current and future needs of the District.

The Principal Leisure Officer (PLO) summarised the review's findings and consultants' recommendations, as set out in the ISFS. There was a relatively low level of swimming-pool provision in the District. It was therefore recommended that a slightly larger pool should be provided to address this deficiency. There was currently an average level of indoor sports hall provision. However, this was likely to turn into a surplus in 10 years' time due to the number of schools which were opening their halls to external users in order to generate income. For example, the hall at Christchurch Academy had been specifically designed to facilitate public access. It was envisaged that a similar arrangement would be incorporated into the re-build of Castle Community College.

The review had identified a latent demand for health and fitness suites. It was, therefore, recommended that provision should be increased to benefit the public and increase revenues. Indoor bowls provision met the existing need and no additional facilities were recommended. The provision of dance/aerobics studios could assist in maintaining the centre's long-term viability. No increase in indoor tennis provision had been recommended. In respect of squash, there was evidence that, nationally, it had fallen in popularity in recent years and there was no requirement for additional facilities. Finally, the consultants had advised that gymnastics facilities should be provided in a specialist, dedicated unit rather than within the main leisure centre.

Turning specifically to the leisure centre project, Members were referred to the Feasibility and Options Appraisal report, presented to Cabinet in January 2016. Although the work plan had been superseded, for the time being it gave a useful indication of progress in relation to the new leisure centre. Briefly, Officers anticipated that a planning application would be submitted by September 2016. The Whitfield site was the consultants' preferred option, but further, detailed investigation was needed on matters such as archaeology, utilities supply, etc. Management arrangements would also be considered. The current operators operated as a charitable trust, but all options would be examined.

The development of facility options needed to be informed by stakeholder consultation with leisure centre operators, clubs, Sport England, etc and this was in progress. Expert advice was needed before public consultation and feedback could be undertaken. Once this had been completed, Members would be presented with deliverable options on which to make a decision. It was anticipated that the new leisure centre would be constructed by the end of 2018. Officers hoped to provide more detail at the next meeting.

In response to Councillor M D Conolly, the Principal Infrastructure and Delivery Officer (PIDO) advised that, although Whitfield was Cabinet's preferred site, Buckland was still in the running. The Director of Environment and Corporate Assets (DECA) added that, in any case, sequential testing would need to be carried out as part of the planning application process to demonstrate that the Whitfield site was the most suitable in Planning terms.

On the use of school halls, Councillor P M Beresford commented that, unless these were open in the evening, they were unlikely to meet everybody's needs. Councillor Conolly raised some concern that assumptions were being made that schools would provide certain facilities, and queried the impact should these assumptions prove to be wrong. The PIDO confirmed that it was for schools to decide whether their facilities would be open to the public. However, one of the funding criteria for school sports provision centred around public access. It was not assumed that every school would be open to the public; only where there was evidence would schools be included – and this would be monitored.

The PLO clarified that Officers had talked to school bursars to gain an understanding of their plans. Whilst nothing could be guaranteed, managing and monitoring this area was a high priority. The DECA added that school facilities were, in general, more likely to be able to serve organised clubs/groups rather than those who turned up on an ad hoc basis. Not only did Sport England expect the Council to provide evidence of needs and how these could be met, but there was also an expectation that school sites would be investigated, to avoid duplication of provision. It was recognised that there were uncertainties with this approach, but sites would be kept under review as the project progressed.

The DECA outlined the process for Members. Cabinet had been asked to consider the business case for refurbishment or replacement of the leisure centre in January 2016. Members had opted for the latter - to be built on a new site. Officers were in the early stages of progressing the project which involved costings, a planning application, work on the facilities mix, stakeholder and public consultation, etc. Once this was completed, the aim was to take a clear recommendation to Cabinet. Councillor Conolly commented that rebuilding on the current site had not been an option for Cabinet since it would have meant the facility being out of action for a considerable amount of time, not least because of the lengthy archaeological works that would have been required before any construction could commence.

The DECA reminded Members that, whilst the Cabinet report had focused on the sports facilities mix, there were potentially other key components to the centre, such as a café, toning suites, climbing wall, etc. Each component would have a capital cost, but could potentially generate additional revenues. These components would be investigated so that Cabinet could take a view on their inclusion. Also included in the costed options would be a 50-metre pool as it was recognised that this was a popular proposal.

In response to Mr Ward, Councillor Conolly advised that the Council was in an awkward situation in that it could not ask for funding from bodies such as the Football Association until it had identified what facilities were needed. The DECA advised that there were alternative sources of funding for 3G artificial football pitches which could potentially be delivered by schools/clubs. Whilst Mr Ward recognised that it would depend upon funding, he urged the Council to include an Olympic pool at Whitfield given that the site (unlike Buckland) was large enough to accommodate one. Councillor N J Collor commented that, given the amount of land available, the Whitfield site could be expanded to accommodate a pool in the

event that funding became available in the future. The PLO advised that Officers were due to meet Sport England in April to explore funding opportunities which were a key part of the project. It was clarified that Lottery funding was routed through Sport England, which would also talk to governing bodies such as the Football Association before allocating funds. It was accepted that funders generally consulted one another to avoid duplication.

It was agreed: (a) That the report be noted

(b) That an updated Feasibility and Options Appraisal Outline Programme be circulated.

6 NEXT STEPS

The PLO advised that Officers had attended Neighbourhood Forum meetings throughout the District in order to engage with the public on options for a new leisure centre. They had also been liaising with the Healthier South Kent Coast Group on the ISFS, and would be presenting to them in June/July on the leisure centre project. In respect of the Feasibility and Options Appraisal, it was intended to go out to public consultation in May/June by holding two detailed workshops, probably at Dover Leisure Centre. It was confirmed that the Group would be consulted before any proposals were taken to Cabinet, which was likely to happen in July.

The DECA confirmed that the consultation process would present all deliverable options to the public. This would ensure that all the options had been open to, and tested by, public scrutiny. That said, more trivial matters (such as small design details) would not be presented to the public. The PIDO added that the IFSF consultation process was another way of feeding into the proposals. IFSF respondents would receive a written response to their questions unlike those attending the workshops. Councillor Collor commented that it was important to ensure that respondents were local residents or users of the facilities. The DECA stressed that the Group would shape how consultation took place, and its timing would be important.

The PLO advised the Group that a trip would take place on 20 April to visit three new leisure centres recommended by the consultants. These were a combined leisure centre and spa at St Albans and two others, with a similar facilities mix to Dover's, at Watford and Flitwick.

In response to Councillor Conolly, the PIDO suggested that it would be appropriate to issue a press release when the results of public consultation were known. The PLO added that there would also be a 'Keep Me Posted' launch and postings on social media.

7 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was agreed that the next meeting should be held on 19 May.

The meeting ended at 6.08 pm.