

Minutes of the meeting of the **DOVER LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Thursday, 19 May 2016 at 5.01 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor M D Conolly

Councillors: P M Beresford
N J Collor
P Walker
Mr P Ward

Also present: Councillor S F Bannister
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 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

In the absence of Councillor T J Bartlett, the Democratic Support Officer advised that it was necessary to appoint a Chairman for the meeting.

2 APOLOGIES

It was noted that Councillor T J Bartlett had sent an apology for absence.

3 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that there were no substitute members.

4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was noted that there were no declarations of interest.

5 NOTES

The notes of the meeting of the Group held on 31 March 2016 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

6 INDOOR SPORTS FACILITY STRATEGY

The Principal Infrastructure and Delivery Officer (PIDO) updated Members on the Indoor Sports Facility Strategy (ISFS), public consultation on which had closed on 6 May 2016. 90 responses had been received raising, amongst other things, issues surrounding swimming, location, sports halls, basketball, use by, and of, schools, operational management and equalities. It was difficult to summarise the responses which had been so varied. However, the results of the consultation would be presented to Cabinet on 4 July and responses to all consultee comments included as an appendix to the report. In response to the Chairman, it was confirmed that the report would set out the proposed changes to the ISFS as a result of the consultation, and contain a summary of the main issues raised by consultees.

Members were advised that Officers working on areas such as finance and public consultation would be invited to attend future meetings where appropriate.

It was agreed that the verbal update be noted.

7 LEISURE CENTRE VISITS

The Principal Leisure Officer (PLO) advised that the Group had visited three leisure centres on 20 April and another on 5 May.

Following the visits, Members' views on the facility options had been sought, and a summary of these could be found on page 16 of the agenda. Five-a-side size 3G pitches had proved popular and were viewed as a core facility. The Chairman commented that a 3G pitch or pitches would be essential were the sports hall provision to be reduced from eight courts to four given that football was currently one of the most popular activities in the sports hall. However, consideration would need to be given to Sport England guidance governing separate changing-rooms. The PLO advised that, whilst Sport England preferred separate changing-rooms for full-size pitches, the pitches proposed would not be full-sized, and specification of changing facilities was therefore open to negotiation.

Pages 9 to 15 of the agenda set out the feedback received from Members on the individual leisure centres visited. In summary, Members had felt generally less positive about traditional climbing walls than 'Clip and Climb' walls, a new concept put forward by the consultants. Members who had had personal experience of the latter praised them and viewed them as potentially good income generators. The layout of gyms and lighting (particularly natural lighting) were also seen as important factors in a successful design.

The Director of Environment and Corporate Assets (DECA) commented that the visits had proved very useful in identifying potential design/architectural problems, as well as learning about the most effective finishes, wear and tear, etc. For example, although there had been generally positive comments about the leisure centre at Watford, one of the areas of concern had been the relative lack of visibility around the swimming area. The St Albans centre was an upmarket facility serving an affluent area, whose ambitions were to compete with the private sector. The Flitwick centre was a newly opened, mid-range facility, with two 5-a-side 3G pitches and a gym which was of similar quality to that of St Albans'. The facility at Ramsgate had a different offer, but it had been interesting to see what was available locally.

The PLO reported that Officers had also undertaken a fifth leisure centre visit to Elmbridge on the outskirts of London. This centre served a mixed demographic and had a core facility mix which was similar to Dover's, although it had an 8-court sports hall. The centre had not been funded by Sport England. It was housed in a 10-year old building which had worn well. Two key elements had come out of the visit for Officers. Firstly, the operators had advised that, in hindsight, they would have reduced the sports hall to four courts. The 8-court hall was under-used and therefore not generating as much income as predicted. Secondly, a soft-play facility was incorporated into a glazed area adjacent to the entrance and café where children could be seen but not heard. This was a good facility which generated a healthy profit. The café at Elmbridge had been the best one of all the centres visited in terms of design and layout. It was what was known as a 'Grab and Go' café, moving away from a full catering facility. The centre had an 8-lane 25-metre pool and a teaching pool with moveable floor. In respect of the latter, the operator

had advised that a moveable floor was essential because it meant that the pool could be used for swimming lessons, aqua-aerobics and water confidence sessions for toddlers.

The Chairman remarked that Members had been sceptical about the suitability of a spa for the Dover centre. However, the Ramsgate spa appeared to be a success, and indicated that spas could do well in areas which were not as affluent as St Albans. He commented that the retail offer at Dover would need to be carefully developed. The PIDO advised that the entrance area at Elmbridge contained a retail offer similar to Ramsgate's which generated a healthy turnover. Officers were mindful that the new leisure centre would need an attractive retail offer, but the detail of this would be considered at a later stage of the process as efforts were now focused on getting the correct facility mix. The DECA added that the retail offer was solely an issue for the Council rather than Sport England. There was consensus that the retail area would be an important element of the facilities on offer.

In response to concerns raised, the Chairman confirmed that the Council was still at the stage of defining what it wanted from a new leisure centre, particularly in respect of the sports facility mix. There was still some way to go and no decisions had been made. By September, the Group would be making further recommendations to Cabinet on the leisure centre, on the back of the ISFS. The PLO clarified that the information in the ISFS would feed into the consultants' feasibility and options appraisal work.

It was agreed that the update be noted.

8 FACILITY MIX - CORE AND COMMERCIAL FACILITIES

The PIDO referred Members to page 3 of the Facility Options report. There had been some slippage in timings, and Officers would now be making recommendations to Cabinet on the facilities mix, options, etc in September. The PLO advised that the process of soft market testing and exploring operational management options would commence at the end of the week. Public consultation on facilities and options were anticipated to take place in the first two weeks of July. The Chairman commented that the timings were tight.

On accessibility, the PIDO advised that Kent County Council's (KCC) Public Health team had advised that the July Cabinet report should contain a preliminary assessment of this matter, identifying whether the proposals in the ISFS met the needs of protected groups. It was confirmed that protected groups would be invited to take part in the consultation, the results of which would accompany the September Cabinet report. Councillor P Walker stressed that the public needed to have confidence that the Council was looking at this issue, and attached importance to it.

Councillor N J Collor raised concerns about the amount of car parking, stating that at least 300 car parking spaces plus coach bays would be needed. The PIDO advised that the proposed parking provision had been arrived at on the basis of initial advice from KCC. It was provisional and could be increased if necessary. In response to queries, it was clarified that the swimming-pool would be the only 8-lane competition standard pool in Kent. The starting point for assessment of facilities was the existing mix at Dover Leisure Centre. Little or no interest had been expressed in diving during development of the draft ISFS, which had been informed by engagement with the governing bodies of various sports. In addition, only a very

small number of the ISFS consultation responses had mentioned diving, and the provision of diving facilities had therefore been discounted.

Members were referred to page 7 of the report which contained an affordability analysis. The PIDO advised that the funding gap of £2.276 million assumed that Sport England would provide some funding and the remainder would be found from the Council's capital reserves and borrowing. The Chairman advised that £2 million had been set aside from reserves for this purpose. The question was whether to allocate less from reserves and borrow more or vice versa. In his view the funding issue was firmly within the Group's remit to consider, particularly as he assumed that the report to Cabinet in September would include funding information. Councillor Walker agreed, arguing that it was imperative for the Group to know the financial implications of the options being considered. Transparency was essential as the public needed to understand why some options were not affordable. Mr P Ward added that this also applied to the choice of site. The public would need to be persuaded as to why a particular site had been chosen. The Chairman suggested that the Director of Finance, Housing and Community and his deputy be asked to attend a meeting to take Members through the funding options as this was a critical issue.

The PLO referred Members to page 8 of the report which set out the facility options based on affordability. Options shaded green were positive additions and should be included, if possible. Those shaded amber, whilst having a relatively small adverse effect on affordability, could perhaps meet a strategic need or be important for the district; no strong recommendations on these were being made by the consultant. Red options would have a strong negative impact on the affordability of the project.

In response to the Chairman, it was confirmed that the soft-play (or similar) facility and café could be crucial to the centre's success. The PLO stated that the consultants' assessment that a soft-play facility would have a negative impact had been based on an unsupervised, non-paying facility located in a multi-purpose room. However, the Elmbridge facility had allowed Officers to see another model, this one being located by the entrance and café, with access to a terraced outside area, and access charged for. Officers would challenge the consultants on this. Councillor Walker commented that there was a huge demand for this type of facility. Members requested that Officers visit a 'Clip and Climb' facility and provide feedback to the Group at the next meeting.

The DECA advised that each of the ten options set out in the report had a capital cost associated with it. The five-a-side pitches were sensible additions for both financial and strategic sports provision reasons. The 'Clip and Climb' facility had positive ratings. However, Officers had not seen one and would need to talk to operators. Councillor P M Beresford commented that there was now no other children's soft-play facility in the area. In respect of the 3G pitch, the consultants' recommendation was that, rather than creating a new facility, it would be better to work with Christ Church Academy which already had a site with planning permission for a 3G pitch, and the requisite changing facilities already constructed. This was the site of a former artificial pitch which would need to be re-laid.

The PLO advised that a sauna and steam-room could be provided at a modest cost. Although it would not generate income, the existing steam-room at Dover was an important facility for customers and it was recommended that a new one should be provided. The DECA advised that the feedback from Ramsgate on toning tables was that they were a popular facility. The costs of installing them at Ramsgate had been low as an existing room had been converted. Providing them at Dover would

clearly cost more as it would necessitate an increase in the floor space of the new building. Furthermore, given local demographic profiles, it was possible that Deal would be a more appropriate location. Your Leisure, the operators of the Ramsgate facility, was of the view that there was not the capacity to sustain two toning table facilities in the district.

Less research had been done by the consultants to assess the local market for a spa facility than for the other facilities because it had been a late addition. Councillor Walker commented that any assessment would need to take account of future demand created by major housing developments. A long-term view needed to be taken on this issue, considering what leisure facilities were likely to attract people to live in the district. The PLO added that feedback from two existing facilities indicated that a separate entrance would be needed. Another option would be to add the spa at a later date.

To summarise, the DECA advised that the options shaded red would clearly add significant costs and should not be included in the facilities mix. Amber options would require more discussions with the consultants. Of the green shaded options, the 'Clip and Climb' facility would need further investigation.

The Chairman summarised the Group's views on options as he understood them. The new centre would have a main pool and a combined learner/confidence pool (with moveable floor). Subject to further information, a soft-play facility should be included. A spa was an attractive but expensive option. On this matter, and in response to questions, the PLO advised that the Ramsgate spa made money. If the sauna and steam-room were to be incorporated into a spa, customers would have to pay for the facility which was currently included in the swimming charge. There were few spa facilities in the district, with one of the existing ones due to close. It was agreed that the consultants should be requested to carry out further research in order for the Group to make an informed decision on a spa facility.

It was agreed to note the report.

9 NEXT STEPS

In response to Councillor Collor, the DECA advised that information on the acquisition of land for the site would be shared with the Group at the appropriate time. Sequential testing in support of the planning application was currently taking place in order to investigate whether any other sites in the town centre were suitable. Planners were beginning to work on an application for the Whitfield site which was Cabinet's preferred location, and were aware of the project timetable.

The PIDO confirmed that Officers would report to the Group's 30 June meeting on 'Clip and Climb', soft-play and spa facilities. Members would also have sight of the public consultation questionnaires and could provide feedback on them. It was clarified that there would be two workshops: one focused on user groups and the other with stakeholders. Councillor Walker stressed that the information given to the public should be user-friendly and include costs. It was important that the public should be under no illusions that there was a bottomless pit of funding for the project. The PLO confirmed that the consultation would include evidence so that the public could understand how Officers had arrived at the core options and their needs analyses. In response to the Chairman, the PLO confirmed that a communication plan was in place to address any criticism from the press and social media.

It was agreed that the verbal update be noted.

10 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Due to the EU referendum on 23 June which affected room and Officer availability, it was agreed that the next meeting would be held on 30 June.

The meeting ended at 6.28 pm.