

Minutes of the meeting of the **DOVER LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Tuesday, 26 July 2016 at 5.04 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor T J Bartlett

Councillors: P M Beresford
M D Conolly
Mr P Ward
P Walker

Officers: Head of Finance
Principal Infrastructure and Delivery Officer
Principal Community and Leisure Officer
Democratic Support Officer

22 APOLOGIES

It was noted that there were no apologies for absence.

23 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that there were no substitute members.

24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was noted that there were no declarations of interest.

25 MINUTES

The notes of the meeting of the Group held on 30 June 2016 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

26 FACILITY MIX

The Principal Leisure Officer (PLO) referred Members to the briefing paper which summarised the likely impact that the provision of a spa facility would have on the cost, design and location of the leisure centre at Whitfield. If Members wished to take the idea further and obtain specialist advice, this was likely to cost in the region of £10,000. The Head of Finance confirmed that the cost of adding a spa would be in the region of £1.5 million which would require additional borrowing. However, it was estimated that a spa would generate £80,000 in annual revenue which would be sufficient to service borrowing of £1.5 million.

Councillor M D Conolly argued that, within the context of the entire project, the cost of the spa was relatively insignificant. He pointed out that four of the nine potential operators consulted had indicated an interest in operating a spa. A further three were potentially interested but required further information. Only two of the nine had indicated no interest, and one of these already operated a spa in Ramsgate. It was likely, therefore, that this operator viewed the spa unfavourably as it would be a competitor. In response to Councillor N J Collor, the Group was advised that, of the 558 responses received, only 17 had raised the issue of a spa facility or sauna/steam room improvements. However, it was acknowledged that the questionnaire had made no reference to the possible inclusion of a spa facility.

The Principal Infrastructure and Delivery Officer (PIDO) reminded Members that the majority of operators wanted the spa included in the first phase of construction. Potential operators had shown a very positive interest in Kent where most of them were not currently operating. It was therefore possible that they were being positive about the spa at this stage because they were seeking the business.

The Head of Finance added that the affordability of the project rested on how much providers were prepared to invest and what the Council could afford to put into it. The successful operator would pay the Council for running the facility; this would be predicated on how much revenue the operator estimated the centre was likely to generate. This payment would dictate how much the Council could borrow since it would be used to pay back the loan and interest.

Councillor P Walker commented that the operators appeared to be dictating what was going to be provided. He reminded Officers that the new centre was designed to cater for leisure as well as sporting activities. Whilst he recognised that there had to be a balance, it was essential that the Group considered different ideas and how a high standard of facility might be achieved for the benefit of the public. He was convinced that a spa would add depth and quality to the centre for what was a relatively modest amount when measured against the overall cost of the project. Councillor P M Beresford agreed that it was important that the new centre catered for leisure activities. Mr Peter Ward added that there was little competition elsewhere in the district in terms of spa facilities. The provision of a spa facility would build on the improvements that were needed to upgrade the existing leisure centre.

The PIDO advised that the provision of a spa constituted a 'nice to have' facility. On the other hand, the provision of sports facilities was based on evidence obtained from Sport England and governing bodies.

It was agreed that it be recommended to the Portfolio Holder for Property Management and Public Protection/Cabinet that a further report be commissioned from a specialist consultant to explore the addition of a spa facility.

27 PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The PIDO advised that there had been a large response to the consultation – 667 responses in total, mostly completed using the on-line survey facility. In summary, 88.4% of respondents supported a new leisure centre, with 69.4% favouring Whitfield as its location. 19% were opposed to Whitfield. The provision of a swimming-pool was the highest priority for 83% of respondents, followed by the health and fitness gym (41.9%), learner pool (28.1%) and sports hall (22.9%). Respondents had stated that 62% of them travelled to the current site by car, 20.8% on foot and 7.5% by bus. Following its relocation to Whitfield, indications were that 65.4% would travel by car, 13.3% by public transport and 11.2% on foot. Finally, 52.6% indicated that they would use the new centre more frequently.

Concerns had been raised about accessibility from the town centre, particularly by the elderly, and the difficulties of using public transport for wheelchair users. Councillor Collor advised that by the time the new leisure centre opened, buses would legally be required to transport wheelchairs. In any case, most buses currently operating were low-floor and could take wheelchairs. Councillor Walker reminded Members that plans were underway for a new rapid transport system linking the town centre to Whitfield. Mr Ward suggested that a walk-way should be

provided from the bus-stop outside Christ Church Academy to the centre. He also commented that comprehensive information should be included on the centre's website on how to get there by public transport. Officers advised that a comprehensive transport plan would need to be submitted with the planning application, and there was a meeting scheduled the following week with Kent County Council (KCC) for consultants and planners to start work on this.

Many consultees, including Vista Twisters, had raised concerns about the proposed reduction in the size of the sports hall. However, concerns appeared to be assuaged when the rationale behind it, particularly the increased use of schools' sports halls, was explained. Officers had worked very closely with all secondary schools (but one) in the district that were identified in the Council's Indoor Sports Facility Strategy (ISFS) as having the potential to provide public access to their sports halls. Officers were confident that the new sports hall provision would work; Christ Church Academy's sports hall was already open and being used by external groups and clubs.

Sir Roger Manwood's and Dover College were willing to work with the Council but there were particular complications for them which would need to be overcome. Dover Boys' Grammar School had received planning permission for a sports hall which, if public funding were secured, would have to be opened up to the local community as a condition of that funding. The PLO added that informal discussions at a recent meeting of the Kent Association of Leisure Officers had prompted debate around the capital and maintenance costs of facilities. Sports hall provision had been discussed, with debate around the possible future reduction of such provision and recognition of the benefits of working with schools to meet local needs. Schools identified in the ISFS were spread throughout the district and were therefore generally also more accessible to community users. In response to a suggestion by the PIDO, Members confirmed that they did not believe further investigation into the provision of a six-court sports hall was necessary, and a four-court hall should be progressed.

The PLO advised that most consultees at events had accepted why a 50-metre swimming-pool could not be provided when the reasons were explained to them. The Dover Gymnastics Club needed a large space which the new centre could not accommodate. However, the Council would work with the club to help find a suitable facility. Dover Squash and Racquetball Club had indicated its preference for three courts. In response, Officers had arranged to meet the bursar of the Duke of York's Royal Military School to discuss access to the school's squash facilities.

Overall, the consultation had elicited generally positive feedback. Nevertheless, Whitfield Parish Council was of the view that there should be more facilities, such as a 50-metre pool, and the Dover Society was in favour of a town centre site. There was general recognition that a new facility was needed, but some disquiet that it would be relocated to Whitfield.

It was agreed that the verbal report be noted.

28 DETAILED FEASIBILITY REPORT

Officers advised that the report required further refinement before going to Cabinet, not least to reflect the outcome of public consultation. It was acknowledged that a further report on the spa would delay overall progress, potentially by a couple of months. Councillor Conolly stressed that it was important to achieve the right leisure facility for the district, even if this meant a slight delay. In response to

questions, Members were advised that the issue of car parking would be considered at the next stage of the project, taking into account the feedback received during the consultation. There was a lack of trade parking at the business park, and it would be important to exclude non-users from the leisure centre's car park. It was emphasised that 250 was not a cap but rather the minimum number of spaces proposed. Finally, it was clarified that refinement of design plans would be progressed at the next stage of works. This would include the café and reception areas as it was recognised that further work was needed to improve these.

It was agreed that the update be noted.

29 LAND ACQUISITION

The Chairman advised Members that Cabinet had authorised the Director of Environment and Corporate Assets to commence negotiations on a parcel of land at Whitfield. Councillor Conolly added that negotiations had reached a stage where Heads of Terms had been reached and discussions had started on the future use of the existing leisure centre site.

It was agreed that the update be noted.

30 NEXT STEPS

The Group was advised that a report would go to Cabinet on 5 September and to the Scrutiny (Policy and Performance) Committee on a date to be confirmed. There would be a special Cabinet meeting on 20 September to consider any recommendations arising from Scrutiny.

It was agreed that the update be noted.

31 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Group was advised that the next meeting would be held on 29 September at 5.00pm. It was provisionally proposed that another would be held on 3 November at 5.00pm.

It was agreed to note that further meetings would be held on 29 September and, provisionally, 3 November 2016.

32 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

That, under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the remainder of the business on the grounds that the item to be considered involves the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

33 FINANCIAL UPDATE

The Group received a presentation from the Head of Finance. Members were advised that the project would be financed through a mix of borrowing, grant funding, capital receipts and use of reserves. The current approved Medium-Term Financial Plan 2016/17-2019/20 included an allowance of up to £7 million to fund the project from earmarked reserves. Initial soft market testing with leisure providers had indicated that the new centre was expected to generate an improvement in the Council's revenue position which would be sufficient to service

additional borrowing to fund the project. In addition, it was anticipated that Sport England would contribute a grant of between £1 million and £1.5 million to the project.

The split of funding for the project would be determined as the project progressed, including consideration as to whether to utilise the maximum approved level of reserves and undertake a lower level of borrowing, or whether to undertake the maximum level of affordable borrowing and reduce the level of reserves used. Councillor Walker welcomed the briefing which gave him a degree of reassurance in respect of the financial position.

It was agreed that the update be noted.

The meeting ended at 6.28 pm.