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Notes of the meeting of the **TIDES LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Tuesday, 17 September 2024 at 2.02 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor S B Blair

Councillors: M Bates
S H Beer
D G Cronk
J P Loffman

Officers: Head of Finance and Investment
Strategic Project Manager
Senior Accountant (Housing and Projects)
Project Manager
Communications Officer
Democratic Services Officer

Also present: Mr Matt McCreith (GT3 Architects)
Mr Steve Rose (Alliance Leisure Services)
Mr Richard Thompson (Hadron Consulting)
Mr Gert-Jan Peeters (Pellikaan) (*Attended remotely*)

12 APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies had been received from Councillors O C de R Richardson and C D Zosseder.

13 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4, Councillors M Bates and J P Loffman had been appointed as substitute members for Councillors O C de R Richardson and C D Zosseder respectively.

14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15 TERMS OF REFERENCE

It was agreed that the Group's Terms of Reference be noted.

16 OVERVIEW AND PROGRESS OF WORK TO DATE

The Strategic Project Manager (SPM) advised that the Tides project had been suspended in 2020 due to Covid and picked up again in late 2021. Challenges – such as the rise in energy and running costs and the global financial crisis - caused by the war in Ukraine had then affected the project. Officers had turned those challenges into opportunities by taking a fresh approach to delivering the project.

In July 2024, Cabinet had agreed that a new scheme developed by Alliance Leisure Services should be progressed to Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stage 2, drawing down £420,000 from the Tides Replacement Capital Project budget. It

had also agreed that Alliance Leisure Services should be appointed as the lead delivery partner for the lifetime of the project, securing other professional services as necessary. Finally, the Project Advisory Group (PAG) had been requested to review design options and the cost implications of adding an extra swimming lane and additional leisure water provision to the scheme. New proposals arising from this investigative work would be taken to Cabinet in January 2025.

The Head of Finance and Investment (HFI) advised that, whilst the cost of the project had been reduced from £26.6 million in November 2023 to £19.2 million in June 2024, there remained a challenging shortfall of £3 million. However, this compared very favourably to the shortfall figure of £8.9 million reported to Members in November 2023. She referred to the presentation and advised Members that the Council supported Your Leisure, the current operators of the centre, with an annual payment of £250,000 in order to keep it afloat. In contrast, it was predicted that the new centre could generate annual net revenue of £400,000.

Councillor J P Loffman queried whether the revenue required to cover the capital funding deficit would be a Council budget allocation or funded by the expectation of a return from the provider. The HFI confirmed that the £167,000 shortfall would need to be covered by either the revenue budget or the management fee from the operator.

The SPM advised that the new facility mix proposals were underpinned by evidence of the district's strategic need. There was currently a deficit of six swimming lanes in the district and the proposed mix would help to cover that need.

Mr Richard Thompson (Hadron Consulting) updated the PAG on the partners/consultants involved in the project. He explained that RIBA Stage 2 was the second stage of a plan of work that set out the eight stages of delivering a construction project, from definition and briefing through to concept and technical design, manufacturing and construction to handover and use. Under the new plans, the tennis centre and sports hall would be largely untouched.

In response to Councillor D G Cronk who asked about disabled access, Mr Thompson advised that good access was critical and the designers were trying to reduce the difference in levels between the car park and the entrance to the new building to help with accessibility. The existing building had a number of steps and long access ramps to navigate which could hopefully be improved in the new scheme. The regulations had moved on since the construction of Whitfield leisure centre and he hoped to be able to show the PAG the proposed elevations at the next meeting to demonstrate the level of accessibility at the front of the building. Mr Gert-Jan Peeters (Pellikaan) added that the new building would be significantly more accessible than the current building, with a swimming-pool pod and much more space for disabled customers.

Councillor J P Loffman sought clarification on the different phases of work and when buildings would be closed. There was a family hub next door to Tides and it was vital that some sort of facility for toddlers and children remained open during construction. He also asked whether it was possible to cut back on gym spaces in favour of leisure water provision. Councillor S B Blair expressed disappointment that there was nothing in the scheme for families and children under 5 years of age. Whilst 50% of people using the new facility might want to swim up and down, the other 50% would want to play in the water. She was firmly of the view that there had to be something for young children and could not support the proposals as they were.

Councillor M Bates commented that there was a growing demand for this type of leisure water facility and Ashford was probably the nearest place offering such facilities. Referring to a previous problem at Whitfield, Councillor Blair sought reassurance that the solar panels on the roof were practical and would be acceptable to the Council's insurer. In respect of toning tables and the moveable floor, she suggested that these were elements that could lead to an increase in NHS referrals and therefore supported the business case for including them.

Mr Thompson clarified that RIBA Stage 2 concept proposals would be presented to Cabinet in January 2025. RIBA Stage 3 included design progression and preparation of a planning application (May 2025). Detailed design and final capital costs in preparation for proceeding into construction would be finalised and approved by Cabinet at the end of RIBA Stage 4 (September 2025). The operator procurement process would run alongside the design development process. Public engagement would take place from 23 September to 20 October 2024. Construction work was expected to start in November 2025 and to be completed by May 2027. He confirmed that the team was investigating the provision of services during the construction phase once the Tides pool had closed which was predicted to be October 2025.

In response to Members' queries, Mr Thompson advised that the design and build contract would include a requirement for frequent risk reviews. He referred to the slide which set out the risks involved, including asbestos removal which was currently an unknown factor. Reducing the number of stations in the health and fitness studio would be difficult because the studio was filling a space over the swimming-pool and 100 stations was the minimum number needed to do that. He reassured Councillor Blair that the insurance market was now much more au fait with solar panels.

The SPM advised that the project was at a stage where there was flexibility around the use of spaces. In terms of sustainability, Mr Thompson advised that some of the key aims for the new building were to make it an all-electric facility and to achieve a minimum of a Building Research Establishment (BREEAM) Very Good rating.

Turning to the facility mix, the SPM advised that inflatables were used at Whitfield for children's pool play sessions, most often during the summer holidays and at half-term and had proved successful. It was proposed that similar would be used at Tides. Swimming lessons for the under-5s were held in the big pool at Whitfield. Tides was predominantly used by families at weekends and holidays and the facility was often fairly empty at other times of the week. Leisure water provision had high running costs which remained the same regardless of the level of usage. Officers had done lots of investigatory work and looked at various options in relation to leisure/splash facilities and a flexible facility was considered the best option.

Councillor Blair recognised that a good deal of work had been done in exploring the facility mix. She pointed out that a moveable floor would also help to maintain an ambient temperature in the pool. Mr Thompson agreed that a moveable floor could serve as a pool cover but that it would be a significant additional cost due to the extra depth required.

Mr Gert-Jan Peeters (Pellikaan) advised that installing a moveable floor would cost at least £500,000. Mr Steve Rose (Alliance Leisure Services) added that it was incumbent upon the project team to identify the most cost-effective solutions. The

SPM advised that moveable floors varied, as did the cost; some covered the whole pool and others covered only half. By the time the team reverted with further proposals, it would be able to explain the costs and benefits/disadvantages of having a moveable floor. Mr Thompson added that there were other authorities with similar pools and moveable floors, but it was difficult to do a like-for-like comparison as their needs and other facilities might be different to Dover's.

In response to Councillor Loffman who asked about the business case, the SPM advised that the background detail to the business case calculations was complex and the team was not in a position to go through all the information at that time. She cautioned against getting side-tracked on this matter and urged the PAG to focus on the key decisions that were needed. Councillor Blair agreed but wanted to be sure that all the options had been explored and that there would be no cause for regrets in a year's time.

RESOLVED: That the verbal report be noted.

17 NEXT STEPS

The SPM advised that public engagement would last for four weeks from 23 September and would involve a series of events and workshops in Deal and Dover. The Communications Officer advised that the engagement exercise would be publicised via press releases and social media such as Facebook. In weeks 1 and 2 of the engagement, the communications team would be at Tides at different times and days across the week. In week 2 they would cover Deal market and the High Street using the Community Roots van. During week 3 they would be at the Whitfield leisure centre. The publicity boards would be up at Tides and Deal library (although Officers would not be present) for the duration of the engagement period. Amongst other things, the plan was for Community Development Officers to drop in to various meetings and to target specific user groups such as those with disabilities. As well as an online survey, paper copies would be distributed. A project microsite would also be created, similar to the one set up by Wiltshire Council.

Councillor Blair stressed the importance of reaching the right end-users to ensure that balanced feedback was achieved, including primary and secondary schools and nurseries. In response, the Communications Officer accepted that, whilst the stakeholder list included schools and local groups, nurseries should also be added to the list. Councillor S H Beer was critical of the proposed engagement period which was too short and should be a minimum of six weeks and preferably eight weeks in her opinion. Furthermore, the publicity posters were difficult to read with a coloured background and the text needed to be bigger. She asked that the Deal Speaking Up group be added to the stakeholder list.

The SPM explained that this exercise was one of engagement rather than formal public consultation. Consultation on the then plans for Tides had been carried out two years previously for a longer period. That consultation had helped Officers arrive at the draft proposals now presented. The planning application would contain full details of the public engagement. She added that a four-week period was long enough to cover a range of locations and community groups, and extending the period would delay a report going to Cabinet until February or March which would in turn delay project progress.

Councillor Beer questioned the use of a survey which implied that people's comments would be taken on board, whereas communication boards simply

presented people with an opportunity to comment. She expressed an interest in seeing the results. The SPM responded that a survey helped Officers to collate and review the information/thoughts quickly. Councillor Bates suggested that communications should be started now given that the engagement period was due to start in six days' time, adding that parish councils were likely to not be meeting for a while so it was important to get the publicity out to them soon. The Communications Officer advised that engagement dates, venues, etc would go on the website and be officially launched on the following Monday.

Turning to operator matters, Members were advised that Your Leisure was currently running Tides and its lease would expire in March 2025. Operator arrangements post-March were being considered, including the possibility of a new interim lease to continue operations from 1 April 2025 until the start of the new management contract for the new facility. The development of the latter was being managed by The Sports Consultancy and would be layered over the construction timetable. With Cabinet's agreement, the management contract would be competitively tendered as part of the next stage of project development. The aim would be to have the appointed leisure contractor in the building before it opened to the public, enabling the contractor to be involved in final design finishes and its employees to familiarise themselves fully with the building.

Continuity of services was a key consideration. Options were being explored in relation to what temporary arrangements could be put in place during construction, including moving some services to the sports hall. Alternative water provision facilities at Dover and Thanet would certainly be signposted. A particular challenge would be maintaining services and energy supply whilst the rest of the building was being demolished. Ultimately, some services might have to shut as the cost of keeping them going would be prohibitive. Since Folkestone leisure centre had closed, the pressure on Whitfield had increased significantly, with memberships and bookings going up drastically.

The SPM reassured Members that project viability was at the forefront of the team's work. The Council's financial team and The Sports Consultancy were working together on the business case to ensure the project was affordable. The Senior Accountant added that regular meetings were held to review interest rates, etc.

RESOLVED: That the verbal report be noted.

18 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The SPM noted that the next meeting would be held on 7 November, at which point a view would be taken on whether to hold the subsequent meeting in early March. Councillor Beer welcomed the idea of the PAG receiving regular updates.

RESOLVED: That the verbal report be noted.

The meeting ended at 3.48 pm.