

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

27 October 2014

RIVER PARK LEISURE CENTRE INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP –INTERIM  
REPORT

REPORT OF CHAIR OF THE ISG, COUNCILLOR MALCOLM WRIGHT

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee previously established the River Park Leisure Centre Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) comprising of the following membership: Councillors Wright (Chairman), Byrnes, Cook, Laming, Lipscomb, Maynard and Phillips.

The ISG has met on a number of occasions since February 2014 and has produced an interim report of its findings to date. This is attached as an appendix.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That The Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the content of the Interim Report of the River Park Leisure Centre Informal Scrutiny Group.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

2     COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

2.1    The subject of the ISG is directly relevant to delivery of the priority outcomes of the Community Strategy as well as supporting our aim to be an Efficient and Effective Council.

3. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

3.1 None directly at this time.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

4.1 There are no significant risk management issues associated with this report at this time.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Minutes of the ISG, held by the Democratic Services Team

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: Interim Report of the River Park Leisure Centre Informal Scrutiny Group

**Appendix 1****River Park Leisure Centre ISG****Interim Report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered at the meeting held on the Wednesday 15 October .**

The ISG has examined the various Cabinet and consultant reports prepared in respect of River Park, but has not seen the reports promised within 2 weeks of our last meeting on the 14<sup>th</sup> July. We understand that these will be available after the RPLC IPG meeting. We have come to the following interim conclusions.

The existing River Park Leisure Centre in its current state needs replacement or refurbishment. The Council views this as an opportunity for the City to leave an Olympic legacy but at an affordable and sustainable level. This has been identified as requiring an urgent decision due to the cost of urgent repairs to the existing centre, low bank rates and requirement for additional facilities. This urgency and the consideration of options at river Park and Bar End gave rise to public and Member concerns.

In law there is no requirement for the Council to provide any leisure or sporting facilities for the public. There is a recommendation in government planning policy for councils to support applications for sporting and leisure facilities. The City Council has a corporate policy to aid and support the health and wellbeing of the people in the district and recognises that sporting and leisure facilities are one of the mainstays in its policies as these types of centres provide a wide range of physical activities to a wide range of people of most ages.

A great deal of research has been done for the Council by Continuum and by Winchester Fit for the Future who have the objective of providing a 50 metre pool and a Leisure Centre facility at Bar End. Continuum are the appointed consultants to the City Council. The ISG has established that there is no support from regional sports bodies for the larger projects proposed so far. The reason given is that Winchester is too 'small' for the type and size proposed. There is information in both reports and from DC management that larger facilities are required for both swimming and fitness equipment. However there seems to have been no work done with regards to long term future requirements/trends for sporting/leisure requirements, this should be investigated.

The ISG established that there is no urgency with regards to the bank rate as the current rate is likely to continue. Irrespective of the current rate the Council's own treasury and debt management will determine the borrowing rate and affordability of the project, this seems to indicate that the proposed projects may not be possible for at least 4 years. The Council is at present carrying out a capital management plan which may make clearer when projects are affordable. The ISG has been concerned from the start that there has not been any substantial capital or operating cost put forward. This should be done to enable the Council to determine whether or not the project can be justified.

It was also established that DC had a good reputation amongst commercial leisure centre operators for managing an efficient service on behalf of many local authorities, but for reasons which were not entirely clear local sports enthusiasts, such as the competitive or representative swimmers, seemed to have some concerns about programming at the Leisure Centre.

The existing centre is a steel framed brick built building which can be renovated as has been done to many of these types of buildings, extending their life by 30 years. The basic structure is sound, but it is clear that a considerable amount of work is required, particularly with the plant, services and enlarged facilities in order to make the RPLC suitable for continued public use. ISG members stated that refurbishment with additional facilities should be considered as a main option regardless of whether this may be the only way forward, due to financial constraints and the requirement of its own corporate policies rather than its aspirations. There is also a case for a 'split' option and ISG members consider this option may allow greater time for consideration, with more stakeholder and public involvement, including fund raising, as the project progresses.

Since the first meeting of the ISG, the RPLC project to date has effectively been a moving target and as such the members feel that work done by the Council still needs to be scrutinised, including the latest consultant report and that it is important that representatives from the University, the County Council and other stakeholders be interviewed to establish their position with regards to usage and funding.

## **The Project so far.**

At present there are two main proposals for the replacement of the River Park Leisure Centre and these proposals are based on the Continuum report (done on behalf of the City Council) which sets out the case to justify replacement. The proposals are a new sports centre at Bar End or a new sports centre at River Park. The first proposal at Bar End has run into difficulties as the land owner has not agreed to let the land required and the Council is now looking at other land at Bar End where the Council has control of the land or the land owner will co-operate and looking at 8 possible options. The second option, the replacement of the River Park Leisure Centre, has run into difficulties due to objection over the loss of green space, facilities and increased traffic. A third option mentioned but not explored is the re-vamp/re-build of the existing centre. There has been some interest shown by Winchester University and health providers but this is unclear with conflicting reports. It has also been said the project needs to start immediately to take advantage of low interest rates but this may not be the most important financial issue.

## **Council Responsibility**

In law or government legislation/recommendation there is no requirement for the Council to provide any leisure or sporting facilities for the public. There is a recommendation in government planning policy for councils to support applications for sporting and leisure facilities. The City Council has a corporate policy to aid and support the health and wellbeing of the people in the district and recognises that sporting and leisure facilities are one of the mainstays in its policies as these types of centres provide a wide range of physical activities to a wide range of people of most ages.

## **Support for sporting and leisure facilities in Winchester.**

The existing sporting and leisure facility (River Park) is generally thought to be well supported and well used by people of the City and the immediate surrounding area but not by the whole district, as other facilities are nearer to the population in the south and other parts of the district. Some studies done by the Council and others have stated that a new large sports facility as a centre of excellence in Winchester would attract more people from within and outside the district. It is now known that no regional sports body will support such a centre as Winchester is too small and without such support it is unlikely a proposed larger sports centre would attract sufficient support to be viable. The Winchester centre was compared to the Eastleigh centre which has a greater footfall but the Winchester centre has a much greater support per head of population.

## **Justification for a new/larger Sports and Leisure Centre**

A great deal of research has been done by Winchester Fit for the Future and Continuum on behalf of the City Council. These reports are unclear as to whether or not to have addressed the lack of support by regional sports bodies. There is information in both reports and from DC management that larger facilities are required for both swimming and fitness. Both reports have consulted local sports

clubs but there seems little information as to what their aims and goals are, do they wish to promote their sport for enjoyment or to have better facilities to enable members to become competitive athletes. We now know Winchester University has no interest in a large swimming pool, only sports halls, what are their aims and goals? There is information on additional footfall to justify a new sports centre but this is not supported with facts, where will these people come from and, importantly, why? It is difficult to see how being next to the M3 motorway will attract sufficient people when the next town north is Basingstoke which has many sports and leisure facilities as do Southampton and Eastleigh.

There is little in any report to show how a new centre can be financed by the City with little evidence to support the expected footfall and business case. A deliberate policy has been taken not to include firm costs or how the money can be raised, in other words a lot of work, time and money can be spent only for the project to fail. The sale of Winchester assets is not an option as all these assets produce revenue.

Several members ask about capital finance and a business plan but agreed answers to these questions could wait until the proposed consultant report but restated their concern over the continued lack of such information.

### **Further options**

#### **The Option to Renovate and extend the Existing Leisure Centre.**

The existing centre is a steel framed brick built building which can be renovated as has been done to many of these types of buildings, extending their life by 30 years. If renovated the centre could be extended to incorporate identified shortfalls (DG management and reports) in swimming (larger training pool), fitness gym (more equipment) and a better entrance (automatic turnstiles).

In proposing this option the members stated that this should not be viewed as a minimum option but as one of the main options.

#### **Split Option to Renovate Existing Leisure Centre with additional facilities at Bar End.**

Members felt that the option of splitting the facility across two sites which might be more flexible with regards to sports club, schools and university usage and allow greater time and participation with more stake holder and the general public as the project progressed should be explored.