

REPORT TITLE: RIVER PARK LEISURE CENTRE – FUTURE USE OF SITE

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REPORT OF PORTFOLIO HOLDER: Cllr Steve Miller, Portfolio Holder for Estates

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WARD(S): ST BARTHOLOMEW

PURPOSE

To outline the process to be started that will determine the future use of the River Park Leisure Centre (“the centre”) site in central Winchester. This includes consideration of improvements and enhancement of the facilities and open spaces adjoining the current centre. The centre will close when the new Leisure Centre at Bar End opens in 2020 (subject to planning permission).

This is a significant opportunity for the council to work with the local community and businesses to redevelop the existing built centre site, and also to enhance the nearby open space and historic monuments to meet the council’s strategic objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the scope of the work and process for starting the project, as detailed in this report, is agreed, including an Informal Policy Group comprising a chairman and four other elected members of the council, two from each group with Councillor Rose Burns appointed as Chairman.
2. That a budget of £150,000 is approved for the initial stage of the project with authority given to the Strategic Director – Place for stakeholder engagement, consultation and development of options including the appointment of external advisors as required, as detailed in this report.

IMPLICATIONS:

1 COUNCIL STRATEGY OUTCOME

- 1.1 Key elements to the project are a) the land currently used for the centre, b) open space, and c) historic assets. This work will support the objective of improving the health and happiness of our community, as well as improving the quality of the environment. It will consider the most appropriate use of a council asset, and will also look to improve the facilities for recreation that are currently available adjacent to the centre site. Other strategic objectives will be supported depending on what preferred option is agreed for the centre site.

2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 The centre is an asset owned by the council that will be surplus to requirements once the new leisure centre opens in 2020, subject to planning approval. The council needs to determine how to make best use of this asset to support the community in its widest sense.
- 2.2 The council will need to determine the viability and financing of the preferred option in the light of the medium term financial strategy and the financial pressures that are predicted for the future. Currently there is no specific resource allocation for redevelopment of the centre site.
- 2.3 To initiate this project work to work through RIBA stage 0 (strategic definition), and to reach the stage of one or more preferred options for detailed evaluation in a strategic outline business case, a budget of £150k will be required.
- 2.4 This budget will fund professional expertise to lead the public and stakeholder engagement work, technical expertise to complement the council's in-house resources, production of visuals and other materials required, initial feasibility and viability evaluation, project support and communications expertise.
- 2.5 It is envisaged that the part of the site that currently has development in place will be redeveloped. This will need to be undertaken in the light of the financial pressures that are facing the council, and will, ideally generate revenue or a significant capital receipt.

3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Professional services will need to be procured in line with the council's procurement processes.
- 3.2 Detailed legal advice on legal and contractual issues relating to the land will be provided during this project.
- 3.3 Should a new development be proposed there will be procurement and construction matters to be considered.

- 3.4 The land was acquired for the purpose of a public park or recreation ground for the City and any restrictions on uses for the site will need to be investigated.

4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This is a new project and staffing resource will need to be made available to support the project work. Some of that will be covered by the budget in 2.3 above, and programme leadership will be undertaken at this initial stage by allocation of current staff resources.

5 PROPERTY AND ASSET IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This project relates to the future use of a significant council asset.
- 5.2 The development of the new Sport and Leisure Centre will allow the existing centre to be closed. The building has reached the end of its economic life and would require considerable expenditure if it was to be renovated..
- 5.3 The site has the potential to be used for a wide range of uses subject to planning and there is likely to be considerable interest in the market if it was to be offered for sale by way of a freehold or long leasehold interest.

6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 The process will be open and engaging, following the model that the council has developed over recent years in relation to major projects.
- 6.2 Initial work to actively engage with the local community and stakeholders is anticipated in the first quarter of 2019.

7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 Environmental impacts will need to be a key consideration in the project.

8 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSEMENT

- 8.1 None specific at this stage of the project.

9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 None required at this stage of the project.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 10.1 An initial risk overview is given below. The project risk register will be developed as the project progresses.

Risk	Mitigation	Opportunities
<i>Property</i>		
<p><i>Property</i> The property has reached the end of its economic life and following closure of the centre there is the risk that the building could be vandalised or set on fire.</p> <p>There is a risk that the building will lie vacant for a long period of time and that Business Rates would continue to be payable.</p> <p>There is a risk that the Council does not have the resources to run another major project and that the property/site will remain unused for a long period.</p> <p>Following the closure of the Leisure Centre there is the risk that it will not be possible to operate the remaining public facilities on the site.</p>	<p>The risk could be mitigated by either securing the property or by demolishing it pending the redevelopment of the site.</p> <p>The risk could be mitigated by securing a short term letting of parts of the property, or by demolishing it.</p> <p>The risk could be mitigated by seeking to sell the freehold or long leasehold of the property.</p> <p>Consider what premises will be required to facilitate the operation of the tennis courts and pitches prior to the closure of the Centre.</p>	<p>An exciting use for the site might come forward generating a capital receipt or income stream</p>
<i>Timescales</i>		
<p>The current leisure centre will close when the new centre opens at bar end, planned for spring 2020</p>	<p>Launching this work now gives the opportunity to consider the best long term use for the current centre, and any short term use that may be appropriate when the new centre opens.</p>	<p>The project has the potential to enhance the current open space facility, and agree a use for the current developed site that meets financial and community objectives</p>
<i>Project capacity</i>		
<p>Inadequate project resource</p>	<p>A project lead has been agreed from existing staff resources; this report requests a budget to enable purchase of additional resource required for the project</p>	<p>There is a development opportunity for current staff to be involved in an exciting project.</p>

<i>Financial / VfM</i>		
The future use of the site could be an unacceptable financial burden on the council tax payer	Financial and value for money assessment will be part of the evaluation of options for redevelopment and enhancement of the site	A creative solution could provide a positive financial position for council tax payers, as well as enhance the built environment, and meet community aspirations
<i>Legal</i>		
Contractual, land-ownership and legal restrictions are complexities in relation to this site	Legal constraints will be carefully considered and advice provided.	
<i>Innovation</i>		
An approach that is innovative may inherently have more financial risk for the council tax payer	Financial risks, viability and feasibility will be part of the assessment of potential options for development	An innovative approach could produce an outcome that adds to the Winchester city offer
<i>Reputation</i>		
The site has the potential to be used for a wide range of uses subject to planning and there is likely to be considerable scrutiny of the process and the outcome.	The process will be open and engaging, following the model that the council has developed over recent years in relation to major projects.	The council has the opportunity to work closely with the local community to achieve a co-created outcome that has broad support
<i>Communication</i>		
The risk is that the community are not well informed and are poorly engaged during the process	Communications and engagement will be at the heart of project planning	The council has the opportunity to work closely with the local community to achieve a co-created outcome that has broad support

11 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

- 11.1 This report relates to the existing developed River Park Leisure Centre site, and the adjacent tennis courts and playing fields, known as North Walls Recreation ground, including the two cricket pitches. Appendix 1 is a plan showing the boundary of the project site.
- 11.2 The scope of this project includes the future redevelopment of the current leisure centre site, as well as the improvement of facilities, and enhancement of the historic and recreational open space adjoining the site.

11.3 The current leisure centre building lies outside the defined settlement boundary for Winchester and consequently falls within designated countryside in adopted local plans. The site adjoins, to the:

- South - The Colour Factory, St Bedes C of E School and adjoining playground, and further south, the University of Winchester and Southampton (Winchester College of Art) campus areas, adjoined further east by the former Police Station site (to be redeveloped)
- West - the edge of city centre urban, largely residential area (Hyde)
- North - the extension of the North Walls recreational and leisure uses (inc playing fields and onwards access to Winnall Moor)
- East - immediately adjacent – the Indoor Bowls Club, Skatepark, Outdoor Bowling Club, Canoe Club and open grassed area, with beyond, the South Downs National Park recreational land (SDNP).

11.4 While the centre site is designated countryside in the local plan as it is outside the defined settlement boundary, and has a proximity to the South Downs National Park, the site at the edge of the existing urban fabric of a residential and University area and, therefore, falls in an area of transition from the core city centre to residential/recreational /countryside areas – with the University campus area on Park Avenue as the point of transition.

Adjacent to the centre are the tennis courts and artificial grass pitch, along with the existing public car parking, which serves an important function, not only for the Leisure Centre but as additional edge of core city centre parking, providing 182 spaces. There are a number of functions which the current centre provides in relation to the existing North Walls recreation area, including:

- Toilets/changing facilities
- First Aid
- Admin support – bookings, opening gates, operation of floodlights etc.
- Café

Upon demolition of the leisure centre, the site would effectively become a brownfield site. The presumption is that the site will be redeveloped for an alternative use, not become open space, subject to appropriate planning permission.

11.5 Initial stages of this project, with indicative milestones, are current envisaged to be;

- Cabinet authority and budget to proceed – October 2018
- Establishing the Informal Policy Group – November 2018
- Internal document review and research to understand the site characteristics, opportunities, and constraints – February 2019

- Procurement of project resource to deliver the engagement element – January 2019
- Resident and other stakeholder engagement to seek initial views on what is important to them in the redevelopment of the centre site, and the improvement of current open space – phased during 2019
- Development of realistic options to progress to strategic business case development – for the currently developed centre site – fourth quarter 2019
- Development of improvement options for the open spaces to be taken forward to cabinet decision making / operational improvement – as appropriate

11.6 The Informal Policy Group (IPG) will be established comprising a chairman and four other elected members of the council, two from the conservative group and two from the liberal democrat group. The chairman to be Councillor Rose Burns. The IPG will offer advice and comment to the cabinet to inform cabinet decisions, including in relation to:

- Document review and research to understand the current site possibilities and constraints
- Community engagement
- Possible options for future improvements to open space and historic assets
- The redevelopment of the previously developed (brownfield) site
- Commenting on options for more detailed strategic business case development and feasibility work

11.7 Importantly there are a number of constraints relating to the centre site which need to be fully understood. This will form part of the initial project work. In summary these are:

Planning: site is designated as countryside in the 2017 Winchester District Local Plan as it is outside the settlement boundary. The South Downs National Park has a local plan which has relevant policies relating to impacts on views looking into and out of the park.

Covenant: restrictive covenant on conveyance to the City Council (1902). In summary the only restriction on the face of the covenant would appear to prohibit 'industrial dwellings', a past form of affordable housing. As part of the initial project work the implications of the covenant need to be clearly understood.

Flooding: Flood zone Category 3 (recognising potential risk to life (residential/commercial uses)) covers the entire footprint of the centre. Recent flood-prevention measures have been undertaken around the site. Sensitivities in policy terms extend to the designation of the River Itchen (to the east) being designated as an area of Biodiversity interest as a Special Area of Conservation.

South Downs National Park: the site is within 60m of the SNDP boundary.

Access: vehicular access is restricted off Gordon Road, off Hyde Abbey Road, both residential streets, in turn taking access off North Walls, part of the one-way system, currently being reviewed as part of the Movement Strategy.

Conservation & Archaeology: remains of the former Hyde Abbey lie to the NE corner of the leisure centre, with designated Conservation Area adjoining the site.

Local sensitivities: in addition to, and arising from, the above there are (and will be) many local sensitivities regarding future proposals for the site, including that there are many mature trees within the site.

- 11.8 It is intended that the new development on the centre site will follow the programme methodology established by the current major projects in terms of the approach to engagement and inclusivity, business case development and the RIBA stages.

12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 12.1 The council does not have to start planning for the replacement of the centre and improvement of the open space. There is the option to do nothing at present, or to focus solely on open space improvement.
- 12.2 This alternative was rejected as it is important to plan ahead for the closure and replacement of the centre, and also to improve the current open space. However both of these aspects have proximity and so it is logical to carry this out in a timely and co-ordinated way.
- 12.3 The council could offer the site for sale on the open market and leave the new owner to progress a development. This would secure a capital receipt and offset the development risk. It would also enable a new development to come forward speedily. However the council would lose control of the end development of the built part of the site which is not a desirable outcome at this stage of the project.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

None

Other Background Documents:-

None

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 – project site boundary