

Part A

Report to: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 18th June 2012
Report of: Managing Director
Title Review of the outcome of the Sports Facilities Study leading to action on specific issues relating to 3 key partners.

1.0 **SUMMARY**

As part of the policy framework for the Core Strategy but also to steer future investment choices, officers have commissioned a Sports Facilities Study (SFS) for Watford (attached as Appendix A). This study needs to be consulted upon with the partners and stakeholders who had input into its creation as well as with the wider community before developing a Sports Facilities Strategy that will identify the actions and resources required to address the issues emerging.

- 1.1 The SFS analysis is that given Watford is a geographically small Borough, it is possible to have both a relatively small number of separate facilities and high levels of accessibility. Having a small number of high capacity facilities – as the two excellent leisure centres at Central and Woodside have demonstrated - leads to economies of scale when compared with a larger number of smaller facilities. The borough also faces significant development pressures so has to make the best possible use of its limited land area.

This is the emerging policy context for the recommendations below to initiate two feasibility studies that would inform the final Sports Facilities Strategy for consideration by Cabinet in the spring 2013. The policy context also recognises that the Council should take action in respect of provision that is not sustainable and combined with the land use requirements for the Irish Centre site, it is proposed that the future of this provision is reviewed as set out in Part B of this Cabinet Agenda.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note and comment on the Sports Facilities Study (SFS) at Appendix A (summarised in 3.3 in the report) and approve the document for future consultation and to support the development of a Sports Facilities Strategy and Action Plan.

2.2

In relation to Woodside (detail identified in 3.4 in the report) to agree:

- a) that, subject to the Cricket Club entering into a Community Use Agreement and an agreement to take forward a co-ordinated feasibility study for Woodside based on

the community sports hub concept outlined in the study, the outstanding loan be written off – details provided in the Part B report;

b) that a feasibility study should be commissioned and funded by the Council to test the viability of a Woodside Sports Hub (including other users within Woodside Playing Fields) and to set the foundation for partner fundraising and a bid for external funding to enable its delivery

- 2.3 In relation to Cassiobury (detail identified in 3.5 in the report) to agree that the Council should fund and commission a feasibility study/masterplan for a multi-user Sports Hub in partnership with the stakeholders.
- 2.4 Agree that the feasibility studies are used as pilots to test the Sports Facilities Study conclusions and inform a final Sports Strategy & Action Plan to be considered by Cabinet in spring 2013.
- 2.5 In relation to Oxhey Park (identified in 3.6 in the report) it is recommended that the Council hold discussions with the Irish Club for the termination of the lease by 31 August 2013 on the basis set out in Part B of this Cabinet Agenda.

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3.0 **BACKGROUND - Sports Strategy**

- 3.1 The Council has played a strong role in supporting sport across the Town. It has played a significant role in investing in clubs, playing pitches and improving participation whilst resources were available to do so. The context now is different as both nationally and within the Council resources for community sport and capital availability is more limited. Indeed, a recent national survey of sports clubs undertaken by the Sport and Recreation Alliance found that nearly half the voluntary clubs in England have seen their surplus halve in the past four years, to an average of just over £1,000; 1 in 4 clubs are running at a loss and another 1 in 4 only just breaking even; adult membership has fallen by 11% since 2008; volunteer retention is an issue for over 50% of clubs; and two thirds of clubs are finding it difficult to attract new members and generate sufficient income.
- 3.2 The Council has to try to respond to both the “top down” national policy agenda and the “bottom up” needs of local clubs at a time of sharply declining resources. It is against this background that the Council identified two clear priorities within its Sports Development Framework (SDF)

Priority 1: Increase community participation in physical activity and sport to contribute towards a healthy town for Watford residents;

Priority 2: Develop capacity within the local sporting infrastructure, particularly around clubs, coaches and volunteers, to improve sporting opportunities.

The SDF makes clear that ‘The recent local government settlement means that we have big challenges ahead in terms of the resources we have available. This means that we need to be even more focused in our approach to Sports Development, thereby ensuring that we are using our resources effectively.’

‘The Watford Sports Development provision has moved away from direct provision to one of enabling and commissioning. We will focus on the following:

- Enabling and commissioning partners/organisations and local sports clubs to create sustainable sporting opportunities amongst identified target groups and develop the capacity within the local sporting infrastructure in identified areas;
- Support the continuation of a vibrant Community Sports Network – Active Watford and other relevant stakeholders through active networks and forums;
- Help secure external future funding for sports to contribute to outcomes locally. Enable/manage funding to be effectively commissioned through our local sporting infrastructure;’

3.3 Given the above the Council needs to be very clear on how it supports growth and promotes participation and investment but also has to be rigorous to address provision that is underperforming or is not sustainable. As part of the policy framework for the Core Strategy but also to steer future investment choices, officers have commissioned a Sports Facilities Study (SFS) for Watford (attached as Appendix A). This study needs to be consulted upon with the partners and stakeholders who had input into its creation as well as with the wider community before developing a Sports Facilities Strategy that will identify the actions and resources required to address the issues identified.

Its analysis is that given Watford is a geographically small Borough, it is possible to have both a relatively small number of separate facilities and high levels of accessibility. Having a small number of high capacity facilities – as the two excellent leisure centres have demonstrated - leads to economies of scale when compared with a larger number of smaller facilities. The borough also faces significant development pressures so has to make the best possible use of its limited land area. The study has produced 3 key goals:

Strategic Goal 1

- To ensure that Watford has a network of accessible, high quality, high capacity, well maintained, well used and financially and environmentally sustainable sports facilities, capable of accommodating local demand, complemented by good quality changing and social accommodation, on a limited number of strategically located sites.
Watford has only one multi-sports club (the West Herts Sports and Social Club). Most other clubs are small and lack the resources to allow them to plan for the future. England Rugby, the Football Association and Sport England all want to see the development of vibrant, sustainable community-based multi-sport clubs.

Strategic Goal 2

- To promote the development of financially sustainable community-based multi-sport clubs offering inclusive opportunities for players of all ages and abilities and both sexes.

There is growing evidence that some traditional sports are in decline. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but they appear to include growing family and work-related pressures on players' and volunteers' time; the amount of sport on television; the often poor (and sometimes worsening) quality of many local facilities; and the unwillingness or inability of some players to pay realistic charges for their sport. In response, forward-thinking governing bodies are responding by developing new forms of their sports, with smaller teams, shorter match times, playable throughout the week and not only at the weekend, encouraging players with limited skill:

- **England Hockey** has launched a new small-sided form of the game called Rush Hockey

- The **England and Wales Cricket Board** is actively promoting shorter matches, for example using the 20-20 format, and developing a softball version of the game requiring less protective equipment. There is also a commercially-run “Last Man Stands” league for teams of eight players, designed to last for only about two and half hours.
- **England Rugby** is actively promoting Rugby Sevens, Tag and Touch in an attempt to reverse the recent decline in participation.
- **The FA** has just launched proposal for 9 -a-side junior football on smaller pitches.

Strategic Goal 3

- To develop new forms of provision for traditional sports in partnership with their governing bodies in order to attract new participants and encourage past participants to return to their former sport, promote more mid-week participation and reduce the peaking of demand for pitches and other facilities at the weekend, particularly Sunday mornings

The proposals to develop the two opportunities below and take action in respect of the third case are consistent with the Sports Facilities Study and would support the development of the strategy.

3.4

Watford Cricket Club

Established in 1950, Watford Town Cricket Club is situated at Woodside, close to the existing depot facility. From a difficult period 5 years ago when it was on the verge of closing, it has successfully grown its membership, youth development and community participation. The Club took out a loan from the Council 1987 over 20 years, however a proportion of the loan is still outstanding. The loan was for expansion and improvement of the club house following the growth of the club from the mid 1970's. However the Club has transformed itself, is breaking even and has a strong volunteer base that is supporting initiatives. The Club's role and contribution fits the SDF vision.

The Club holds a 30 year Full Repairing and Insuring lease from 1st April 1985 expiring on the 30th March 2015 i.e. 3 years unexpired.

It has now approached the Council to support investment in the changing room facilities. These are in very poor condition and are clearly identified in the Sports Facilities Study as not meeting current standards. The SFS projects a strong future for the Club envisaging that it should be part of a master planned community sports hub at Woodside with up-graded changing and social accommodation. The Club has approached the Council asking firstly for a write-off of the loan, on which there is limited prospect of repayment, and seeking investment in club house and changing facilities. The estimated costs of these works would be in excess of £430k for which there is no capital funding available.

The draft SFS vision is for a multi sports changing room and clubhouse overlooking the enclosed cricket pitch, with extensive use of the grass pitches, and a floodlit 3rd generation artificial turf pitch in the eastern part of the site to be managed from Woodside Leisure Centre.

The proposal therefore, given the opportunities for growth in participation and quality of sports offer is:

a) that, subject to the Club entering into a Community Use Agreement and an agreement to take forward a co-ordinated feasibility study for Woodside based on the community sports hub concept, the outstanding loan be written off;

b) that a feasibility study should be commissioned and funded by the Council to set a vision for the Woodside Sports Hub (including other users within Woodside Playing Fields) and to set the foundation for partner fundraising and a bid for external funding to enable its delivery.

3.5

Fullerians RFC

The Council is the Freehold owner of Cassiobury Park and to the North of this land holding is further land owned by the Council leased to the Trustees of the Fullerians Rugby Football Club, some 9.5 acres as sports pitches, The club have a separate lease with Hertfordshire County Council who own the land on which their club house sits.

3.5.1

Request from the Rugby Club

In August 2011, the Council was approached to consider the surrender of the existing lease and re grant of a new 99 year lease of the sports pitches. The Club believed that a longer lease would aid their fund raising efforts with Sport England and the RFU. They are seeking to build a new club house with an envisaged cost of circa £1m. As stated above the club house is on land owned by Hertfordshire County Council. However, as there is 51 years unexpired on their existing lease from Watford Borough Council, it was agreed that there was in fact no impediment to fundraising by not extending the lease term of the sports pitches.

The Club has approached the Council formally on a proposed redevelopment of their site and the adjoining sites owned by Watford Boys Grammar School and Sun Postal as a new Sports Hub. The club has also submitted a planning application to extend the changing facilities.

The draft SFS identifies this zone, amongst others, as a strategic site, ideally with a community multi-sports hub with a vision for a masterplan that would provide for a 3G pitch designed for rugby and football, better drainage and an artificial cricket wicket with access from Bellmount Wood Avenue. The Fullerians have confirmed that they would be receptive to the idea of a Sports Hub as long as it met all of their key criteria.

At present, they have undertaken a considerable amount of work on their initial proposal to focus just on their club house, following the criteria set out by the Rugby Football Union, and have developed what they consider to be an affordable proposal that extends and refurbishes their current buildings / facilities to a stage where a planning application has been submitted. They have also carried out extensive research with the assistance of professional advisers in relation to possible funding streams.

However Fullerians have now met with partners to discuss their joint aspirations and how a larger multi-sport redevelopment scheme could satisfy wider ambitions. Fullerians have subsequently made it clear that before they could commit to a multi-stakeholder development, they would need to see a firm proposal for what is proposed and how it would be operated; especially given the money that the Club has already committed to its own proposals.

It has been suggested that in order to move the Sports Hub proposal to the next stage that an independent feasibility study is commissioned that looks at the site as a whole, takes a brief from each stakeholder and that this is developed to encompass a master plan for the site with several design options for consideration. The report should also consider the operational aspects of the development and make recommendations following discussion with each of the stakeholders. The report would need to address issues in relation to green belt, flooding, planning and highways.

Proposal

i) that the Council should fund and commission a feasibility study/masterplan for the Sports Hub in partnership with the stakeholders.

3.6 The Irish Centre Background

At the end of the 1980s the Watford & District Irish Association was desperate for club premises and sought assistance from the Council. It was agreed in 1991 to lease them part of the public Oxhey Park in which to erect a suitable building. As is usual there was to be a rent charged for the lease. However, in order to fund the building the Association needed a grant or a mortgage. It was decided to offer a mortgage as it was unlikely that a bank would have been willing to make a loan and anyway the Council could not sanction an arrangement whereby a bank would be able to repossess the building in a public park in the event of default.

The Council had old changing rooms on the site that were subject to vandalism. The deal was that the Association would construct a building for its own use and also to provide new changing rooms for the Council. A community use agreement was signed as part of the package.

During 2004 the Association's chairman contacted the Mayor to explain that it could not afford to maintain the premises properly and seeking support from the Council. It was apparent that the building, being a limited life property, would not realise anything like a sufficient price to recoup the mortgage loan.

3.6.1 Financial Arrangements (commercial and lease information is provided in Part B)

The mortgage is dated 15 February 1991 and is for 40 years.

In 1996 the Council reduced the interest rate on the mortgage and in 1999 the Council agreed to suspend the interest payments to help the club with its financial problems.

In September 2000 the club agreed to restart repayment of the loan.

The Association has been indicating since 1996 that it is in difficulty.

A new lease was granted to the Watford Irish Association Ltd for a term of 30 years and 3 months from 29th November 2005 to 14th February 2036 to regularise its status. The previous lease had been to Trustees. In 2005 with the Irish Club in financial difficulty still and with an increasingly dilapidated building they could not afford to maintain, Cabinet agreed to offset the costs of the maintenance by paying a grant up to the sum due to be paid to the Council by way of mortgage interest for a period of 5 years.

In 2005 Cabinet also agreed to the rent abatement being increased from 30% to 50%.

The effect of the Cabinet decision was to provide a five year interest free holiday to September 2010 to allow the Irish Club to use this saving to invest in the facilities and to enable their finances to be re-organised.

However the present condition of the premises is satisfactory to poor.

- 3.6.2 The Council met with the Irish Club treasurer and trustees in August and September 2011 to review the position. The combination of the difficult financial position of the Club and the repair requirements of the facilities was discussed as was the redevelopment requirements of the Health Campus.

3.6.3 The Health Campus Redevelopment

The link Road from Dalton Way to Wiggshall Road will dissect the Oxhey Park pitches (Zone 12). The s.106 agreement provides for funding for replacement recreational facilities. The relocation of the pitches will impact on the Club as there will be fewer users of the facilities. The link road will need to be constructed by December 2014.

Primary School

The County Education authority has identified the need for additional primary school places in the West of Watford. The Campus site has been earmarked for this within the Core Strategy. The County is considering the option of locating a 3FE school (feasibility plans have been produced) within Zone 12 which is the best suited position which will require land on which users of the Irish Club park and the land on which the Club is situated.

3.6.4 Conclusion

Given the above, it is recommended that the Council hold discussions with the Irish Club for the termination of the lease by 31 August 2013 on the basis set out in Part B of this Cabinet Agenda.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial

4.1.1 The Head of Strategic Finance comments that with regard to feasibility studies, there is a contingency provision of £200k in 2012/2013 within the Council's capital programme for feasibility and Upfront Disposal costs. No commitment has been made against this provision at this point in time and could be utilised to complete any work related to the sports strategy.

With regard to the outstanding loans to the Watford Cricket Club and the Irish Centre, it has long been recognised that these would be unlikely to be repaid and can be written off against the general provision for bad debts within the Council's accounts. Agreement to write off these debts should not be unconditional however and needs to be linked to future joint community use in the case of the cricket club, and surrender of the lease in the case of the Irish Centre.

4.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)

4.2.1 The Head of Legal and Property Services comments that all three clubs have tenancies that are protected by the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954. The cricket club will still have an obligation under its lease to keep the club house in good repair and condition even if the loan is written off.

4.3 Equalities

The sports facilities strategy and action plan will be supported by an equality impact analysis. This will be developed in parallel with the strategy and will be supported by relevant data and information and feedback from consultation.

An equalities impact analysis (Appendix B) in relation to the Irish Centre recommendation has been undertaken. This identified potential impacts on the White Irish community, as the main users of the Centre, but has also identified ways in which these impacts could be addressed.

4.4 Potential Risks

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
<i>Partners unwilling to participate in feasibility studies</i>	1	4	4
<i>Funding unavailable to undertake the feasibility studies</i>	1	4	4

<i>Cricket club is unwilling to enter into a community use agreement</i>	1	4	4
<i>Impacts identified within equality impact analysis not mitigated</i>	1	3	3
<i>Those risks scoring 9 or above are considered significant and will need specific attention in project management. They will also be added to the service's Risk Register.</i>			

4.5 **Staffing**

4.5.1

No staffing implications have been identified in this report

4.6 **Accommodation**

4.6.1

No accommodation issues are impacted on by this report

4.7 **Community Safety**

4.7.1

No community safety implications have been identified in this report

4.8 **Sustainability**

4.8.1

No sustainability implications have been identified in this report

Appendices

- *Appendix A - Sports Facilities Study*
- *Appendix B Equality Impact Analysis*

Background Papers

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report. If you wish to inspect or take copies of the background papers, please contact the officer named on the front page of the report.”

- *Sports Development Framework 2011*

File Reference

- *None*