

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-126-2007-08.

Date of meeting: 10 March 2008.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Leisure & Young Persons.

**Subject: Feasibility of Sports Hall provision and Waltham Abbey
Swimming Pool.**

Responsible Officer: Derek Macnab (01992-564051).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992-564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to extend the Terms of Reference for the Leisure Task and Finish Panel to:

(a) assess the feasibility of providing a new Sports Hall at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool, and

(b) evaluate the service and financial implications as opposed to entering into longer term Dual Use Management arrangements at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre.

Background:

1. Waltham Abbey Sports Centre (WASC) is a Dual Use Sports Centre, located adjacent to King Harold Secondary School, in Broomstick Hall Road, Waltham Abbey. The Council enjoys the right to use the premises for the benefit of the wider community by virtue of a joint agreement entered into with the Education Authority, i.e. Essex County Council. This dual-use agreement came into effect on 1 October 1977 for a period of 30 years and formally expired on 30 September 2007, although parties are holding over under the existing terms.

2. Over the years the District Council has provided additional facilities to the original sports hall and changing rooms, with the construction of two squash courts, a dance studio and bar area. With the exception of the dance studio and the bar (which is closed during the day) the school has exclusive use of the Centre during the day (8.30am – 5.00pm) and priority use of the Centre, excluding the Squash Courts on Saturdays. This exclusive use arrangement covers the 40 weeks of the school term. The facilities are available to the District Council to organise holiday activities during the school holidays.

3. A critical appraisal of the operating costs of the Sports Centre was undertaken as part of the Best Value Service Review of Leisure Management. This highlighted that in comparison to the Council's other leisure facilities, in financial terms, the Centre was performing significantly poorer. Despite a number of cost reduction initiatives undertaken as part of the Budget Process 2003/04, this position, largely due to the constraints of the joint use agreement and age, design/quality of the facilities, still pertains.

4. The long-term management of the Sports Centre was considered by the Ad Hoc working Group on Leisure, as part of the Alternative Management Review. The Working Group concluded that based on the Centre's potential, and given that the Joint Use Agreement, at the time, had only two years left to run, that the Centre be excluded from the Tender process. The Centre therefore has continued to be managed In-House, until any new arrangements are put in place at the expiry of the current joint-use agreement.

5. Historically it has been difficult to achieve high levels of use and participation by the local community. This can largely be attributed to the relatively utilitarian nature of the changing/toilet facilities etc., which have been designed with school use in mind (rather than the more discerning modern leisure customer), coupled with the irregular hours and the physical limitations of the facilities. In addition, there would appear to be a resistance from local young people to participate, who may have the impression that they are returning to school in their time off.

6. The programme delivered by the centre, whilst still offering some coaching courses, instructed sessions and holiday schemes, has tended, particularly since budget savings on staffing etc., in 2003/04, to be on a club hire or letting hall basis. The bar still meets the needs of sports users such as the 5 a side football and cricket leagues, as well as hosting functions such as birthday/anniversary parties.

7. Staffing levels are currently at the minimum level to cover the opening hours therefore, there is at risk of ad-hoc closure of the facility in the event of unanticipated staff absences. As part of the externalisation process of the Council's other four Leisure Centres, all the staff at WASC were offered the opportunity to transfer to the other centres, to be managed by SLM, the Council's Leisure Management Contractor. Despite the uncertainty of approaching the end of the current Dual Use Agreement, all the staff declined this offer.

8. Under the requirements of the Dual Use Agreement, in simple terms the District Council is responsible for meeting all expenses with the exception of 20% of the General Managers salary and, 50% of building maintenance costs. The Council meets 100% of the bar area and each respective party bears 100% of the costs of their own Public Liability Insurance. The Council retains all income from hire and use of the facilities and receives a contribution towards utility costs.

9. The Council also provides other Leisure Facilities in Waltham Abbey, at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool. These are managed under contract by SLM, the Council's Leisure Management Contractor, who since being appointed have undertaken a major Capital Investment Programme, including changing room and fitness suite refurbishments, as well as an extension to provide a new Movement Studio.

Task and Finish Panel Review:

10. In March 2007, after a period of initial review, the Leisure Task and Finish Panel, which has been reviewing future management options for the Sports Centre, recommended the following course of action, which was subsequently agreed by Cabinet:

(i) That the Council tries to ensure that Community use is retained at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre for the benefit of local people; and

(ii) That the current management arrangements, (under the terms of the current Dual use Agreement) do not represent Value for Money in the longer term and as such the Council should be looking to achieve a reduction in risk and lower revenue consequences, in any future arrangements, which may include the involvement of a third party Leisure Management Contractor, secured by open competition.

11. As the Governing Body of King Harold School, at the time, had yet to identify a Preferred Management Option, the Leisure Task and Finish Panel has continued consideration of the issue in this municipal year.

Progress to date:

12. The Leisure Task & Finish Panel met on the 25 February 2008, and were advised that the school were now prepared to agree to an external contractor option being pursued, provided that the school did not have a direct interface with the contractor, who in effect would be the Council's appointed management agent. The school were also keen to ensure that no education funding was used to subsidise community use.

13. The Task and Finish Panel were also asked to recommend the following course of action to Overview and Scrutiny namely:

(i) That a new Dual Use Agreement is entered into with King Harold School for the future management of Waltham Abbey Sports Centre;

(ii) That the Council seek an external management contractor to undertake their management responsibilities under the new Agreement;

(iii) That the Contract period be in line with the existing contract for the Council's other four Centres; and

(iv) That the Council enter into a holding arrangement with King Harold School on the existing terms of the current Agreement, until 31 March 2009.

Potential Alternative Re-provision Option:

14. However, the Leisure Portfolio Holder has recently identified a potential alternative course of action outside of the current Scope and Terms of Reference, of the Leisure Task and Finish Panel, who have been focusing on options to manage the current facilities at the school site.

15. Given that the Council's Swimming Pool, located at Roundhills, Waltham Abbey, (approximately 1000 metres from Waltham Abbey Sports Centre – See Appendix 1) has already undergone significant refurbishment and extension to the swimming facilities, there could be scope to construct a new sports hall of the same dimensions as the sports hall at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre (36m x 18m), alongside and integral to the Swimming Pool complex.

16. The potential benefits to such a proposal would be:

(a) that the Swimming Pool at Waltham Abbey would become a multi-use Leisure Centre offering a wide range of both wet and dry sports facilities;

(b) public participation could be increased significantly, due to unrestricted opening hours and the effect of offering a wide range of sports and leisure options on one site;

(c) management and revenue costs could be reduced significantly, as Waltham Abbey Pool, already as a core staff and management structure;

(d) the Sports Centre at King Harold School could still be made available by the school for community use on a hire basis outside of curriculum use, as is the practice of most other Secondary Schools; and

(e) there would be a significant net increase of provision in Waltham Abbey, which is an area of the District with some severe health inequalities.

17. At this stage no detailed feasibility work has been undertaken other than a few indicative estimates of construction costs. Clearly before the Cabinet would be in a position to agree any re-provision proposal, more detailed work will need to be undertaken. It is therefore proposed that the Cabinet request Overview and Scrutiny Committee to extend the Terms of Reference of the Leisure Task and Finish Panel to undertake the initial feasibility work, reporting their findings and recommendations back to Cabinet for consideration.

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

18. An opportunity has been identified to enhance Sports and Leisure opportunities in Waltham Abbey, whilst at the same time achieve on efficiency in the way the Council delivers leisure provision. It would be desirable to explore this option before considering entering into a new longer-term arrangement with King Harold Secondary School for the future management of the existing Sports Centre.

Other Options for Action:

19. To continue with seeking new management arrangements for Waltham Abbey Sports Centre.

Consultation Undertaken:

20. No external consultation undertaken to date.

Equality Issues:

21. Waltham Abbey has significant health Inequalities including the lowest life expectancy for adult males in the District. New Leisure Facilities could encourage healthier lifestyles. Facilities would be fully accessible, an improvement over the current facilities at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre.

Resource Implications:

Budget Provision: The 2007/08 total expenditure for Waltham Abbey Sports Centre is £472,920 (including salary costs of £245,000). The Operating Defect in 2007/08 at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre is projected to be £339,870. Indicative costs for a new Sports hall in the range of £2 to £2.3M.

Personnel: The current staffing establishment at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre is 1 General Manager, 2 Assistant Managers, 1 Admin/Duty Officer, 2 P/T Receptionists (19 hours and 16 hours) and 4 Leisure Attendants (2 x 36 hours and 2 x 24.75

hours).

Land: There would appear to be sufficient space to construct the Sports Hall adjacent to the Swimming Pool, subject to all necessary planning approvals.

Council Plan 2006-10/BVPP Reference: Key Aim – to enhance the quality of life of the Community by the provision of Accessible Leisure and Cultural Opportunities.

Relevant Statutory Powers: The Local Government Act 1974.

Background Papers: Leisure Task and Finish Panel Minutes and Final Report 2006/07.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None.

Key Decision Reference (if required): Key Decision – Waltham Abbey Sports Centre.