

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-021-2018/19
Date of meeting: 08 November 2018



Portfolio: Assets and Economic Development
Subject: Gymnastic Centre North Weald Airfield
Responsible Officer: Julie Chandler (01992 564214)
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- 1. That Cabinet seek a bid from the 2019/20 budget for a Capital Allocation of £240,000 to invest in the Gymnastics Centre at North Weald Airfield, to enable essential building works to be undertaken and to equip the facility with a complete set of new gymnastics apparatus;**
- 2. That expressions of interest are sought from suitably qualified gymnastics clubs to enter into a lease in order to provide opportunities for local children and young people of all abilities to participate in recreational and competitive gymnastics and,**
- 3. That delegated authority is granted to the Service Director Commercial and Regulatory Services in liaison with the Asset Management and Economic Development Portfolio Holder to agree the final terms of the lease.**

Executive Summary:

Epping Forest Gymnastics Centre at North Weald Airfield was established in 1986 for the purpose of providing a centre of excellence for gymnastics, catering for children and young people from the district and surrounding area. It is now in a poor state of repair and investment is needed to undertake essential building works and replace the ageing equipment.

The current lease for the facility is up for renewal at the end of December 2018. Due to the lack of investment and commitment to developing gymnastics by the current leaseholder, the tenant has been given notice to vacate the building at this time.

However, gymnastics continues to have a very high profile, due to the great success of British Gymnasts in World, Olympic and Commonwealth Games. The current facilities for gymnastics across the Epping Forest District cannot accommodate the number of children and young people wishing to participate in the sport.

This report therefore seeks Cabinet approval to invest £240,000 in the Council owned purpose built gymnastics centre at North Weald Airfield, to cover the costs of essential building works and repairs, and the purchase of new gymnasts apparatus. This investment is order to enable the facility to be fully utilised as a beginner through to development level centre of excellence.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The Epping Forest Gymnastics Centre has received minimal investment by the current tenant over the last 25 years and is now in need of significant repair and improvement to enable its use to be maximised. Other Epping Forest facilities providing gymnastics in the area cannot cater for the level of interest and hence, several hundred children are on waiting lists to participate in gymnastics.

By improving the purpose built facility at North Weald Airfield and purchasing new apparatus, the Council can meet the demand for gymnastics. This would not only increase participation by young people in sport, but also is in accordance with the Council's policy to invest capital to generate a revenue return. The lease income would be significantly greater than current interest rates achieved in the Council's investment portfolio.

Other Options for Action:

1. To demolish the centre, although, if this option is taken, gymnasts who currently use the centre will need to be re-accommodated elsewhere, if the facility is closed permanently. There is already a lack of availability in the district.
2. To ensure only essential health and safety work is undertaken and continues to lease the centre at a peppercorn rate. However, some external works are essential which would require significant future Capital investment and a complete set of new apparatus is needed to operate the centre safely in the longer term. This option would not realise a revenue return for the Council.

Report:

1. Epping Forest Gymnastics Centre at North Weald Airfield was built by the District Council in 1986, following an assessment of gymnastics facilities in Essex, which identified a deficit in provision. It was designed as a centre of excellence catering for beginner through to elite gymnastics and for many years was successful in generating many international level boys and girls gymnasts and operating an extensive beginner programme.
2. Due to the success of the club, in the 80's and 90's it attracted professional coaches from Russia and Eastern Europe and during this time, the centre was managed by a British team coach.
3. As the centre was established to support the development of gymnastics, it has always been leased at a peppercorn rent, although the tenant was responsible for internal repairs and maintenance of apparatus. This was on the basis that it enabled young people with talent to initially be identified through school delivery and beginner classes, who could then be coached at an affordable and in many cases, a subsidised rate. Over the first 12 years of operation, the centre was very well run and maintained to a high standard, with regular investment in the equipment, coaching and internal elements of the building.
4. However, following a change of management in the late 1990's, which is not unusual in gymnastics as coaches and managers move to higher level provision, it was taken over by a local gymnastics Trust who over recent years, have provided little investment into the centre and its infrastructure. This has resulted in a diminished membership level with less classes and coaching being delivered.

5. Over the last three to four years, officers from the Council have pursued the Trust to improve the standard of the building and to make investment into the centre, but to no avail. The centre is now in a poor state of repair both externally and internally and only a limited number of classes are provided by the Trust, with the building being hired out to several other providers, to operate their own activities from.
6. All external works to the building are the responsibility of the Council, but the interior of the building and external land surrounding the centre, are the responsibility of the Leaseholder. Unfortunately, a recent building survey identified that the whole site now requires significant investment to bring it up to a standard suitable for ongoing safe and efficient provision of gymnastics.
7. As the Trust has not invested in the required maintenance of the centre and have not maximised use of the facilities, they have been issued with a termination notice at the next break clause of the 31 December 2018.
8. However, bearing in mind the significant success of British Gymnastics over the last 5 – 10 years, with several World Champions being developed in the UK, the profile of gymnastics has never been higher. It has also been identified locally, that there are waiting lists for all gymnastics clubs currently provided in the district and in the neighbouring district of Harlow.
9. In addition, over the last few years, the Council has received several expressions of interest from clubs that already operate successfully and have large waiting lists, in taking over the lease of the Gymnastics Centre at North Weald. Therefore, there is the opportunity to invite expressions of interest for the operation of the Centre.
10. Therefore, if the Council invests in the gymnastics centre, it will be able to realise a revenue return and will also be able to provide valuable sporting opportunities for local young people. It is proposed that the Council provides the Capital funding as it does not wish to grant a long lease term which would be necessary for any club to attract external funding or grant aid. An initial term of 5 years is proposed.
11. This report therefore seeks Cabinet agreement to a capital bid being made for :
 - i) The investment of a total of £240,000 in the internal and external refurbishment of the gymnastics centre and purchase of gymnastics apparatus;
 - ii) Subsequent to i) above, for officers to invite expressions of interest for lease of the gymnastics centre to a suitably qualified local gymnastics provider/s for the provision of beginner to elite gymnastics.

Resource Implications:

Investment of £240,000 Capital for the refurbishment of the gymnastics centre. Expressions of interest will seek an indication of the potential annual rental income which will be in excess of any current investment return from the Council's Capital. The Council has a policy of investing capital to achieve revenue returns.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

The gymnastics centre requires a range of improvements to maintain it up to Health and Safety requirements.

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has been undertaken with British Gymnastics and local gymnastic providers.

Background Papers:

NWA Gymnastics Centre Building Condition Survey.