

**Report to:** Lead Member for Resources & Climate Change

**Date of meeting:** 14 June 2022

**By:** Chief Operating Officer

**Title:** Heathfield Leisure Centre, Heathfield

**Purpose:** To seek approval for an extension to a property agreement and to commence a formal consultation in relation to the future use of community leisure facilities currently provided at Heathfield Community College.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change is recommended to:

- 1. Approve the proposal to hold a public consultation regarding the future of community use of the leisure facilities at Heathfield Community College;**
  - 2. Approve an extension of the current property agreement to Wealden District Council; and**
  - 3. Authorise Chief Operating Officer to agree a further extension should it prove necessary.**
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## **1 Background**

- 1.1 Heathfield Leisure Centre is situated within Heathfield Community College (HCC) grounds, which is a local authority-maintained college. The Leisure Centre is a separate building adjoining the main college campus. The Leisure Centre is occupied by Wealden District Council (WDC) under long-term operational leases that expire in July 2022.
- 1.2 Under the terms of the lease with WDC, HCC has priority use of the leisure facilities in school hours and, outside of these hours, there is community use of the facilities by residents and sports clubs. The facilities include a sports hall, gym and aerobic training. The facilities are managed by Freedom Leisure, WDC's contracted leisure provider. The Centre is one of fourteen "Joint Use" agreements in which East Sussex County Council (ESCC) has a property interest in leisure facilities, typically involving school sites.
- 1.3 In late 2020 WDC decided not to renew its lease and thereby to return the Centre to the County Council. This decision by WDC to stop running community leisure facilities was made following a strategic review of all its leisure facilities. WDC decided to concentrate its community leisure services at Crowborough and Hailsham centres, which are subject to proposed improvement works in 2024/25.
- 1.4 In East Sussex, leisure services have traditionally been the responsibility of district and borough councils, as there is no statutory requirement on the County Council. ESCC's interest in the Joint Use centres is as a property owner and not a leisure commissioner or provider, and so it engaged an independent advisor in early Spring 2021 to consider options for when the lease ends with WDC and they cease to run the community leisure provision. The recommendation made by the consultant was to undertake a market assessment to consider future operators/companies that would come forward with financially viable and sustainable proposals.
- 1.5 During summer and autumn 2021, the expression of interest for the Leisure Centre was extended a number of times due to lack of providers' responses. ESCC ensured that all local stakeholders (including Heathfield College) were aware of the process and deadlines.
- 1.6 The Expression of Interest (EOI) market test exercise concluded on 5 November 2021. There were two submissions of interest submitted by commercial operators. ESCC analysed the information and data provided. ESCC also requested additional financial data which was subsequently assessed, and indicated that ESCC would need to commit to substantially increased ongoing financial support (for which no budgetary provision currently exists) and accept additional risks to the Council if a new provider were to be granted a medium to long-term lease. As ESCC has no

statutory requirement to act as a leisure commissioner or provider, it needs to seek views via public consultation on a way forward.

- 1.7 It is proposed that ESCC grants a three month short term agreement extension from 18 July 2022 to WDC to enable a continuation of service delivery whilst a six week consultation takes place. A further lease extension could possibly be agreed in September if necessary.

## **2 Supporting Information**

2.1 The purpose of the consultation is for ESCC to understand views on the current community leisure facilities at Heathfield College, and to enable ESCC to encourage ideas and suggestions on proposals to run the leisure facilities on a financially sustainable model. The community use of leisure facilities could change if there is not a financially sustainable model for ongoing use. ESCC has a duty to consult and the proposed timetable is set out below.

2.2 The proposed timetable is based on a minimum 6 week consultation period (it should be noted that discussions are ongoing regarding the length of the consultation period and the expiry of the WDC leases):

- 14 June 2022 - Lead Member Resources and Climate Change decision regarding holding a consultation.
- 21 June 2022 - Consultation starts.
- 2 August 2022 – Consultation concludes.
- 23 August 2022 - Analysis of consultation results will take at least three weeks.
- 13 September 2022 - Further Lead Member Resources and Climate Change decision.

2.3 Agreement deadlines:

- 17 July 2022 - WDC leases expire.
- 18 July 2022 – Proposed three month agreement commencement.

2.4 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken and it will be updated using analysis of the public consultation.

2.5 The formal consultation process would be conducted by an online survey via ESCC's Citizenspace webpage and hard copies of the survey would be available at Heathfield library and at County Hall reception.

2.6 Heathfield Community College will continue to provide school sport facilities within the building and there will be no change to these activities.

## **3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 The Lead Member is recommended to approve a 6 week public consultation on future use of community leisure community facilities undertaken at Heathfield Community College.

3.2 It is recommended that a short term property agreement extension is granted for 3 months from 18 July 2022 whilst the public consultation takes place. A future Lead Member report will consider an analysis of the public consultation including the Equality Impact Assessment and next steps and be presented for decision. The commercial terms of the lease extension are shown in an Exempt report in a later agenda item.

**Ros Parker**  
**Chief Operating Officer**

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**Local Members**  
Heathfield – Councillor Rupert Simmons  
Wealden East – Councillor Bob Bowdler