

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

**Date of meeting:** 20 September 2022

**By:** Chief Operating Officer

**Title:** Heathfield Leisure Centre, Heathfield

**Purpose:** To review and fully consider the outcome of the public consultation in respect of non-college community use of Heathfield Leisure Centre

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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

- 1. Note the findings of the public consultation on the future community leisure provision at Heathfield Leisure Centre that took place between 28 June 2022 and 9 August 2022.**
  - 2. Approve to cease provision of non-college community use of the leisure facilities at Heathfield Leisure Centre from 17 October 2022.**
  - 3. Approve the Council working with the College to ensure a smooth transition to exclusive college curriculum use of the leisure facilities.**
  - 4. Delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Assistant Chief Executive to carry out all actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.**
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## **1 Background**

- 1.1 Heathfield Leisure Centre is situated within Heathfield Community College (HCC) grounds. The Leisure Centre is a separate building forming part of the main college campus. The Leisure Centre is occupied by Wealden District Council (WDC) under a long-term operational lease. Under the terms of the lease with WDC, HCC has priority use of the leisure facilities during 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, dance studio and aerobic training. The facilities are managed by Freedom Leisure; WDC's contracted leisure provider.
- 1.2 In late 2020 WDC decided to cease community provision at Heathfield Leisure Centre ('the Centre'), not to renew its lease and to return the Centre to East Sussex County Council ('ESCC'). ESCC ran an expression of interest exercise in November 2021 to seek proposals for viable and sustainable business models for continuing non-college community use of the Centre. No viable sustainable options were received.
- 1.3 On 14 June 2022, the Lead Member of Resources and Climate Change considered a report relating to the future of the Centre. The Lead Member noted the outcome of the Expressions of Interest exercise (EOI) including the additional financial support that would be required for the running of the community facilities and approved a six-week public consultation regarding the non-college community use of the Centre.
- 1.4 The Lead Member also approved a short-term extension to the property agreement between ESCC and WDC for a three-month period from 18 July 2022 whilst the public consultation took place. The three-month extension with WDC has now been agreed and ends on 17 October 2022.
- 1.5 The June 2022 report set out that a further report would be presented to the Lead Member providing an analysis of the outcome of the public consultation, including an updated Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA), and setting out the proposed next steps. The purpose of this report is to provide that update.

- 1.6 ESCC notified a number of district and town councils, including WDC, of the public consultation when it opened, for their comments. The public consultation concluded on 9 August 2022.
- 1.7 The final public consultation analysis report is attached as Appendix 1. The six-week public consultation was conducted on the Council's 'Citizen' webpage with hard copies available at County Hall and Heathfield Library. The Consultation asked for detailed information from respondents as well as seeking opinions on three options:
  - a. Ending non-College community use of the Leisure Centre.
  - b. Keeping the Leisure Centre open for non-College community use.
  - c. Consideration of alternative operating models.

## **2 Supporting information**

### ***Summary of the results of the public consultation***

- 2.1 In total there were 121 responses. All responses were online (i.e., no paper copies). Respondents could identify themselves in multiple ways, with the largest groups being Residents (73%), Parent/carers (26%) and Visitors (14%). Prior to 2020, 62 of the total respondents (51%) regarded themselves as frequent (weekly or more often) users of the Leisure Centre. 20 respondents (17%) did not use the Leisure Centre prior to 2020.
- 2.2 When asked when they last visited the Centre, 87 (72%) said they had used it in the current calendar year, 9 (7%) have never used it.
- 2.3 50 respondents (41%) have used other publicly run leisure facilities within East Sussex during the previous 12 months. When asked which ones, there were 48 responses that mentioned facilities in Hailsham, Uckfield, Crowborough (all within Wealden district) and Eastbourne. 74% indicated that they have not used private leisure facilities during the same period.
- 2.4 When asked if the Leisure Centre were to close would it be possible to use alternative facilities in East Sussex over half chose not to respond. However, those that did respond advised other Wealden facilities at Uckfield (21%) and Crowborough (20%) were the most popular alternatives.
- 2.5 109 respondents (90%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposals to end community use, with 114 (94%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing that community use should be maintained.
- 2.6 In terms of suggesting an alternative operating proposal there were 69 responses. However, there were no organisations, groups or residents that came forward with a detailed operating model. The responses received instead offered a number of suggestions for future operating models including (i) expanding opening hours to include daytime; (ii) enhancing the facilities to compete with other private leisure facilities in the area; (iii) better promotion; (iv) providing a wider leisure programme including enhanced refreshment facilities; (v) enhanced customer service; and (vi) use of volunteers to run the Centre.
- 2.7 Respondents suggested that the Centre be returned to HCC for future management. There were also comments included about classes that had been cancelled at short notice.
- 2.8 A large proportion of respondents cite prohibitive cost of travelling to other centres as a deterrent to using alternative facilities elsewhere in the County and cite their perception of the lack of equivalent facilities in the Heathfield area.
- 2.9 Full copies of all the responses received as part of the consultation, together with a report of all the verbatim responses received, have been placed in the Members' Room at County Hall.

### ***Financial Implications***

- 2.10 As set out in the 14 June report, the previous expression of interest process elicited no viable and sustainable options for continued community use of the Centre. Similarly, the public consultation has not resulted in any new proposals for an alternative operating model.

2.11 A brief assessment of the financial and commercial implications for each of the options considered through the consultation are set out below. More detailed analysis is set out in an exempt item later on the agenda.

- *Option a – Ending non-College community use of the Leisure Centre*

The Council has a modest budget to support the HCC curriculum use and the non-college community use of the Centre. If non-college community use were ceased, this would result in an on-going overall saving for ESCC.

- *Option b - Keeping the Leisure Centre open for non-college community use*

If this option is pursued, there would be a substantial increase in the costs of managing the facility for non-college community use, significantly in excess of the existing budget.

- *Option c - Consideration of alternative operating models*

As outlined above, the consultation responses provided a number of suggestions relating to changes to the operating model; however, none of these offered a financially sustainable model for continued non-college community use. Even with the proposed changes, significant financial resources would be required to maintain non-college community use of the Centre.

In addition, a number of the suggestions received through the consultation are not considered feasible on a college site for a variety of reasons, primarily due to safeguarding requirements. HCC has sole day time use for the majority of facilities during the school day to enable it to deliver the curriculum activities.

### **Key impacts and mitigations (including EqIA)**

2.12 An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken, and a summary of the findings is appended. (Appendix 2). The full Equality Impact Assessment is available in the Members Room.

2.13 In making a final decision on these options, the Lead Member is required to have 'due regard' to the duties set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. Equality impacts have been considered in relation to all proposals to identify any adverse impacts that may arise disproportionately for people sharing legally protected characteristics, as defined in the Act. The public consultation explicitly asked whether any specific impacts in relation to these characteristics are identified. A record of the consultation findings relating to equality characteristics is provided in Appendix 2. The Lead Member must read this record and consider it alongside all the other factors and information when deciding on the future non-college community use of the Centre.

2.14 Summary of the potential equality impacts identified by respondents:

- Limited public transport to alternate facilities, potentially disproportionately affecting younger and older people, disabled people, and carers, and those living in rural areas ('rurality' is additional focus for ESCC).
- Potential health impacts, arising from inability to access the leisure centre facilities or alternatives, specifically for disabled people (physical and mental health), older and younger people (especially those with SEN and/or who are neurodivergent).
- Potential for increased loneliness and isolation, particularly for older and disabled people.
- Impacts on women who may have more caring responsibilities and limited time and/or income to access alternate venues.
- End of GP exercise referral service to Heathfield (of 6 months discounted membership), particularly impacting older and disabled people.

2.15 Impacts are identified in relation to some of the legally protected characteristics and for some people sharing these characteristics.

2.16 Mitigations identified if the Centre is closed include the following:

- Other clubs, sports and activities are available to improve health and alleviate isolation in the Wealden district and surrounding areas.
- Potential use of the GP exercise referral service in alternate venues.

2.17 Respondents also proposed better provision/subsidising of bus routes or a shuttle bus to alternate leisure facilities, replicating classes in another venue, better advertising of the Centre and its offer, or simply keeping the Centre open. However, it is not proposed to implement any of these proposals due to budgetary and practical implications.

### ***Analysis of public consultation and next steps***

2.18 An analysis of the results from the public consultation has been outlined earlier in this report. It is clear from respondents who completed the questionnaire, a significant number of those replying access other leisure facilities in the surrounding area. As noted in 2.3 above, the facilities accessed are primarily the Wealden District Council leisure operated facilities, managed by Freedom Leisure in Uckfield, Crowborough and Hailsham. From the respondents who completed the questionnaire, only 50% commented on what alternative premises they would use if the facilities were closed. Over 42% of the respondents answering this question outlined they would use Crowborough and Uckfield plus other venues were also identified. It is clear from respondents' answers that alternative leisure centre facilities are already being used and if the community facilities were to close some respondents could use other facilities.

2.19 Through the Expression of Interest process in November 2021, the Council sought to identify a viable and sustainable provider to run the community facilities; however, this identified that continued non-college community use would result in substantial increased costs. The public consultation has provided some key information about how respondents are accessing a range of leisure facilities outside Heathfield and other surrounding towns. It is recognised that any closure of leisure facilities in Heathfield may impact different residents in different ways and the Equality Impact Assessment (appendix 2) and key elements are set out in paragraphs 2.14-2.17.

2.20 Taking into account the wider public consultation outcomes, the outcome of the expression of interest exercise conducted last year, the equality impact assessment and the financial implications detailed in this report and the exempt report later on the agenda, it is recommended to cease non-college community use of leisure facilities at Heathfield College.

2.21 If the recommendation is approved, ESCC will continue to engage with WDC in ensuring a smooth hand back and transition of the facilities to the college. WDC will need to provide vacant possession of the site by 17 October 2022. A lead-out plan requirement is set out within the lease extension to ensure that ESCC receives all the information required to enable this.

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

3.1 In reaching a decision on the future of non-college community use of the leisure centre at Heathfield, the Lead Member must carefully consider the consultation feedback; the equality implications set out in the Equality Impact Assessment as well as the wider financial implications. The Lead Member is recommended to note the outcome of the consultation.

3.2 The Lead Member is also recommended to approve to cease non-college community use of the Centre (option a in the consultation) with effect from 17 October 2022.

3.3 If the Lead Member accepts this recommendation, the Lead Member is further recommended to approve ESCC working with HCC to ensure a smooth transition of the Centre for curriculum use only and to delegate authority to Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Assistant Chief Executive to take all steps necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.

3.4 Officers will work with Wealden District Council and its leisure provider in preparation of the lease expiry.

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

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**Local Members**

Heathfield – Councillor Rupert Simmons, Heathfield and Mayfield

Heathfield – Councillor Bob Bowdler, Wealden East

Appendix 1 - Public Consultation survey summary

Appendix 2 - EQIA impact assessment statement