

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

**Date of meeting:** 28 February 2023

**By:** Chief Operating Officer

**Title:** Uckfield Leisure Centre – next steps

**Purpose:** To consider a formal public consultation in relation to the future options for facilities at Uckfield Leisure Centre (including Uckfield swimming pool)

---

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

*The Lead Member for Resources and Climate change is recommended to approve the proposal to hold a 10-week public consultation regarding the options for Uckfield Leisure Centre (including Uckfield swimming pool) to commence in March 2023.*

---

**1 Background**

- 1.1 Uckfield Leisure Centre is occupied by Wealden District Council (WDC) under a 20-year operational lease that expired in July 2022. Both Councils agreed to a 12-month extension until July 2023. The Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change approved the lease extension on 14 June 2022 based on revised financial terms.
- 1.2 Uckfield Leisure Centre comprises a swimming pool and dry side leisure services. Freedom Leisure (FL) have a direct 12-month contract extension with WDC. FL was originally set up 20 years ago by WDC to run leisure services, they now run other leisure facilities in East Sussex and beyond.
- 1.3 Uckfield Leisure Centre is on the same site as Uckfield College but is a separate building from the school and was not part of the new College build programme funded by the Department for Education (DfE). During school weekdays, Uckfield College uses the swimming pool, but it is not a secondary school curriculum requirement. A small number of primary schools use the pool for their school curriculum use. Local residents can use the pool, café, and fitness suite at various times during the school day and residents can use the dry side facilities outside of school hours.
- 1.4 In 2020, WDC Cabinet undertook a review of their four leisure facilities and decided not to renew the lease for the two East Sussex County Council (ESCC) centres (Uckfield and Heathfield). In January 2022, WDC provided a press release advising that they are investing £9 million in new, or adapted leisure facilities at Crowborough and Hailsham, but these will not be on stream until 2025 or 2026.
- 1.5 During summer and autumn 2021, ESCC commenced an Expression of Interest (EOI) market testing exercise undertaken by an independent advisor, to assess if a sustainable and viable ongoing or alternative operating model could be found for the Centre. The marketing period was extended twice due to a lack of market interest. ESCC ensured that all local stakeholders (including the College) were aware of the process, deadlines, and were kept fully informed. It concluded on 5 November 2021. There were two submissions of interest submitted with a Business Case and their proposals involved significant financial support from the County Council.
- 1.6 WDC has recently re-confirmed that it is not their intention to renew the lease in July 2023 and following the Expression of Interest marketing exercise held last year, ESCC now proposes to commence public consultation on the options for the Leisure Centre.

## **2 Supporting Information**

### *Uckfield College*

2.1 Uckfield College have a 3G pitch which is managed via a direct contract arrangement by Freedom Leisure, along with other school hall facilities in their main campus buildings.

### *Market intelligence*

2.2 Over the last 3 months, at a national and regional level, there has been some wider acceptance that cost-of-living increases and the energy price increases have directly impacted on swimming pools resulting in temporary or permanent closures. Leisure Centres, including swimming pools which operate at low profit levels, were outlined in a recent Local Government Association (LGA) article in December 2022. The LGA recently reported on the number of increased closures and encouraged local authorities who are leisure commissioners to assist.

2.3 The consultation outcomes would need be analysed for Members to consider alongside wider financial aspects and taking into account an Equality Impact Assessment.

2.4 *Timetable summary, based on a 10-week consultation period:*

- 28 February 2023 - Lead Member Resources and Climate Change decision regarding holding a public consultation.
- Early March 2023 - Consultation starts for 10 weeks.
- Mid May 2023 – Consultation concludes.
- June 2023 - Analysis of consultation results.
- June 2023 - The Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change will consider the consultation results and make a decision regarding the future of the site.
- 17 July 2023 - WDC lease expires.

2.5 Part of the Consultation process will be to seek views from all stakeholders, including Uckfield College and Uckfield Town Council and consider any new ideas/proposals that may come forward. The dry side facilities must continue to be used on an ongoing basis as part of the College curriculum delivery.

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

2.7 The formal consultation process would be conducted by an online survey via ESCC's Citizen Space webpage and hard copies of the survey would be available at Uckfield College and at County Hall reception.

2.8 Uckfield College will continue to use the facilities within the leisure centre building and the 3G pitch for curriculum use and there will be no change to these arrangements. They will also continue to offer outside of school hours community use of the 3G pitch and associated main school building facilities.

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

3.1 WDC has recently re-confirmed that it is not their intention to renew the lease in July 2023 and following the Expression of Interest marketing exercise held last year, ESCC now proposes to commence public consultation to seek views from all stakeholders, including Uckfield College and Uckfield Town Council and consider any new ideas, or proposals that may come forward.

3.2 The Lead Member is recommended to approve a 10-week public consultation on future use of Uckfield Leisure Centre (including Uckfield swimming pool) to commence in March 2023.

Contact Officer:

Nigel Brown - Email [Nigel.Brown@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:Nigel.Brown@eastsussex.gov.uk)

Tel. No. 07394 410630

**Local Members**

Uckfield North – Councillor Claire Dowling