

Report to: Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

Date of meeting: 11 July 2023

By: Chief Operating Officer

Title: Uckfield Leisure Centre, Uckfield

Purpose: To review and fully consider the outcome of the public consultation in respect of future options for community use of Uckfield Leisure Centre (including swimming pool) and to agree a lease extension of the facilities.

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 Uckfield Leisure Centre that took place between 18 March and 27 May 2023.**
 - 2. Approve a 19-year lease extension between East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council to continue ongoing provision for community use of the leisure facilities, including the swimming pool at Uckfield Leisure Centre whilst retaining Uckfield College curriculum provision.**
 - 3. Approve, as an interim measure, a short-term property agreement between East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council for occupation of the Leisure Centre if the proposed 19-year lease extension is not completed by 17 July 2023, noting the current lease between both parties expires on 16 July 2023.**
 - 4. Delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer to carry out all actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report including but not limited to finalising the terms of the lease.**
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1 Background

- 1.1** Uckfield Leisure Centre is situated within Uckfield College (UC) 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, UC has priority use of the dryside leisure facilities during school hours. Outside of these hours, there is community use of the facilities for both dryside and wetside facilities. The facilities include a sports hall, fitness suite, studio, two squash courts, swimming pool, splash pool, sauna and steam room, café and creche. The facilities are managed by Freedom Leisure; WDC's contracted leisure provider.
- 1.2** In late 2020 WDC decided to cease community provision at Uckfield Leisure Centre ('the Centre'), not to renew its lease and to return the Centre to East Sussex County Council ('ESCC') as the freeholder of the site. ESCC therefore 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 28 February 2023, 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 ten-week public consultation regarding the non-college community use of the Centre and swimming pool.
- 1.4** Previously, at the 14 June 2022 Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change meeting, the Lead Member approved an extension to the property agreement between ESCC and WDC for a

one-year period from 18 July 2022. The report to the 28 February 2023 meeting 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.

- 1.5 The final public consultation analysis report is attached as Appendix 1. The ten-week public consultation was conducted on ESCC's 'Citizen' webpage with hard copies available at County Hall, Uckfield Library, Uckfield Leisure Centre and the Town Council Civic Centre. The consultation asked for detailed information from respondents as well as seeking opinions on five options:
- a. Keeping all dryside and wetside facilities at the Leisure Centre open for usage both by the College and the community;
 - b. Keeping all dryside facilities at the Leisure Centre open for both community and the College but ending all wetside use;
 - c. Ending all dryside community use of the Leisure Centre but keeping the wetside facilities open for usage by the College and the community;
 - d. Ending all dryside community use of the Leisure Centre and closing the wetside facilities so that only the dryside facilities will remain open but solely used by the College;
 - e. Considering alternative operating models consistent with the existing College use.

2 Supporting information

Summary of the results of the public consultation

- 2.1 In total there were 3,306 responses, of which 3,283 were received online and the remainder were filled in by hand. Most respondents were concentrated in and around Uckfield; 68% of all respondents had a TN22 postcode, 11% had a TN6 postcode, and a further 14% had a BN8, TN20 or TN21 postcode.
- 2.2 The remainder of the submissions either didn't specify a postcode or were from people in other neighbouring areas. In terms of age, 15% of respondents were under the age of 35 years, 36% were aged 35-49 years, 25% were aged 50 to 64 years, and 14% were aged 65 years and above.
- 2.3 Respondents were asked the reason for their interest in the consultation. The most common responses were "as a resident" (69%), "as a current member or user of the leisure centre" (43%) and "as a parent/carer" (34%). There was also strong representation from members of various local groups, clubs and organisations, including Uckfield College, Uckfield Grasshoppers Junior Football Club, Hartfield Stoolball Club, Uckfield Walking Football Club, AFC Uckfield Colts, Uckfield Runners and the Fun & Friendly Badminton Club, among others.
- 2.4 80% (2,649) of all respondents said they have visited the leisure centre since the start of the current calendar year, and only 2% (71 respondents) said they have never been to the leisure centre. 52% (1,723) of all responses were from people who said they use the leisure centre at least once a week, and a further 25% (818) said they use the leisure centre 1 to 3 times a month. In terms of the facilities used, 1,269 (38%) people said they use the dryside facilities at least once a week, and 1,238 (37%) said they use the wetside facilities at least once a week (these figures include 784 respondents (24%) who said they use both wetside and dryside facilities once a week or more).
- 2.5 The survey asked respondents to advise on other leisure centres they used. In summary, the most commonly visited dryside facilities were Crowborough (335), Hailsham (155) and Isenhurst Health Club (121). The most frequently visited wetside facilities were Crowborough (362), Hailsham (152) and the East Sussex National Hotel, Golf Resort and Spa (140). Other sites mentioned included the Dolphin Leisure Centre in Haywards Heath and the Triangle Leisure Centre in Burgess Hill.

- 2.6 Respondents were asked whether they would be able to visit alternative leisure facilities in East Sussex, should Uckfield Leisure Centre close. Over half either chose not to respond to this question but used the 'Other' field to state that they would be able to use other facilities. Of those that did express an ability or willingness to use alternative facilities, the responses were Crowborough (24% of all respondents), Hailsham (8%) and Lewes (8%) for both dryside and wetside facilities.
- 2.7 3,254 respondents (98%) stated they either strongly agreed or agreed with the suggestion to keep both dryside and wetside facilities at the Leisure Centre open for both community and College use, while 95% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with proposals to end community use of all facilities but keep some facilities open for use by the College. Only 20 respondents (0.6% of all responses) disagreed with the statement that all dryside and wetside facilities should be kept open for use by both the College and the community.
- 2.8 Respondents were offered the opportunity to explain the reasons for their view, and 2,312 respondents (70% of all responses received) took the opportunity to do so. Over 1,250 respondents cited concerns over increasing traffic and the associated impact on the environment should they have to travel to alternative facilities, while others cited the cost of travelling to other facilities as a barrier. Many residents also highlighted the fact that there are a lot of new housing developments being built in and around Uckfield, and expressed concern about the pressure that the town's increasing population might have on leisure facilities in other towns such as Crowborough, were Uckfield Leisure Centre to close. Several residents also pointed out that Uckfield Leisure Centre is the only pool in the area with fully accessible changing facilities and disability hoists for changing and entering the pool.
- 2.9 Many commented on the physical health benefits of swimming and other activities currently on offer at the Leisure Centre. Over 1,100 respondents also mentioned the social benefits associated with visiting the Leisure Centre, with some respondents expressing concern that the closure of the Leisure Centre might lead to a rise in antisocial behaviour, as well as an increase in mental health issues and more social isolation. There were also concerns that the closure of the Leisure Centre might result in fewer children learning to swim.
- 2.10 1,559 people (47% of all respondents) responded to the question asking for suggestions for an alternative operating model. Many felt that it was hard to comment without having access to the figures and associated information.
- 2.11 Many respondents commented on the strong community spirit in Uckfield and suggested organising community-led fundraising initiatives. Others suggested running the Leisure Centre as a Community Interest Company (CIC). Several respondents also questioned whether the Council has applied for grants and external funding, such as the recently announced Sports England grants, as well as Lottery Funding.
- 2.12 There were also suggestions that the Leisure Centre could install solar panels on its large south-facing roof, as well as ground-source heat pumps as a way of reducing energy bills and to help make the Leisure Centre more sustainable.
- 2.13 Other residents focused on ways that the Leisure Centre could increase revenue. Several respondents suggested hiring out the facilities for private events and functions, while others suggested hiring out some of the facilities to local schools. Other suggestions received included upgrading the facilities to encourage greater use and to make them more competitive with other private leisure facilities in the area, increasing admission charges, charging for car parking, extending/reopening the restaurant and creche facilities, and offering a greater range of fitness-related classes and activities. Many also called for better marketing and advertising to help sell the benefits of the Leisure Centre to those who do not currently use the facility.
- 2.14 There were also suggestions to offer different membership and visitor options to encourage more people to join, such as offering day-passes, senior membership deals, swim-only passes, and maternity membership schemes. Some local business owners also suggested a company subscription scheme that businesses could offer to their employees.

- 2.15 Several respondents also suggested that East Sussex County Council re-approach Wealden District Council to see if they would reconsider extending the lease, while others suggested approaching private companies to explore a public/private partnership.
- 2.16 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.

Outcome of the consultation regarding the future of Uckfield Leisure Centre

- 2.17 Reflecting on the outcome of the public consultation outlined in the paragraphs above, ESCC has been in further discussions with WDC and the College. WDC has agreed in principle to a new 19-year lease with ESCC for a continuation of all services currently provided, subject to approval through WDC governance processes. The service is to be delivered through their existing leisure partner, Freedom Leisure and will include all wetside and dryside activities. The College curriculum use will be unaffected and there will be no changes to the provision of the 3G pitch.

Financial Implications

- 2.18 The terms and conditions of the new lease will remain broadly the same as the original 2002 lease, including an annual RPI increase. Additional detail about the commercial terms of the proposed lease is set out in an exempt report later on the agenda.

Uckfield Leisure Centre - Summary of Equality Impacts

- 2.19 An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken, and a summary of the findings is appended in Appendix 2. The proposed Lease extension with WDC will result in no changes to the current service delivery. The full Equality Impact Assessment is available in the Members' Room. The Lead Member must have due regard to the equality implications set out in the Equalities Impact Assessment in making this decision.

3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 3.1 In reaching a decision on the future of curriculum and community use of the Uckfield Leisure Centre, including the swimming pool, 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 For the reasons set out in paragraph 2.17, the Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change is recommended to:
- 3.2.1 Approve a 19-year lease extension between ESCC and WDC to continue ongoing provision for community use of the leisure facilities, including the swimming pool at Uckfield Leisure Centre whilst retaining Uckfield College curriculum provision.
- 3.2.2 Approve, as an interim measure, a short-term property agreement between ESCC and WDC for occupation of the Leisure Centre if the proposed 19-year lease extension is not completed by 17 July 2023, noting the current lease between both parties expires on 16 July 2023.
- 3.2.3 To delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer to take all steps necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report including but not limited to finalising the terms of the lease.

- 3.3 If the Lead Member agrees the recommendations in 3.2 above, officers will work with Wealden District Council to prepare a temporary property agreement until the new 19-year lease and associated documents are completed.

ROS PARKER
Chief Operating Officer

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LOCAL MEMBERS
Councillor Claire Dowling, Uckfield North

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
None