

SUBJECT	FARNHAM PARK PLAYING FIELDS – FUTURE DEVELOPMENT
REPORT OF	Resources Portfolio Holder
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Director of Resources
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WARD/S AFFECTED	Stoke Poges

1. Purpose of Report

The report sets out the recommendation of the South Buckinghamshire Panel for the future of the Farnham Park Playing Fields. It seeks agreement for funding to undertake some initial work related to the recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Council agrees a budget of up to £50,000 funded from the General Reserve, to explore the feasibility of an enabling development.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

The recommendations follow from the view of the Panel that the Playing Fields are an important but underutilised community facility that is in need of significant investment to improve its usage and to be financially more sustainable. An enabling development on part of the site is seen as crucial to help finance improvements to the community facilities, but such a development would have to argue very special circumstances in planning terms. Funding is therefore requested to explore the feasibility of such an enabling development.

3. Content of Report

3.1. The Farnham Park Playing Fields are part of the Farnham Park Trust¹ which was created when land was transferred to the Council to be used for the wellbeing of residents of the area. The Council is the corporate trustee.

3.2. The Playing Fields are currently operating at a net cost of in excess of £100,000 per annum, and the buildings on the site are at the end of their useful lives. The current situation is not sustainable, and options to change the position have to be considered.

3.3. When considering the options the two key objectives stated previously by members were:

¹ Trust created by the Eton Rural District Council Act 1971

- Reduce the operational cost of the playing fields.
- Improve its usage for outdoor sports and the community.

3.4. Based on the work undertaken by external consultants the Panel considered four options, all of which involve some residual cost for the Council/Trust. These are summarised in the following table .

Option	Description	Investment £k	Revenue Excl Cap Fin £k	Revenue Incl Cap Fin ² £k
1. Do nothing	Leave existing facilities in place, carrying out essential maintenance to make the buildings safe and rentable	Potential £150k per building, cumulative cost could be £0.75m+	£98k (deficit)	£98k (deficit)
2. SBUK and Unity MA only, remainder reverts to general open space	Maintain buildings and site in accordance with requirement of SBUK lease and needs of Unity MA. Remainder of site for local residents to use and dog walkers.	Potential £150k for SBUK changing facilities	£64k (deficit)	£64k (deficit)
3. New changing rooms and 3G pitches	Consolidate changing facilities into a single building for all users, including those of 3G pitches. New building to have bar/café facility.	Building £1.9m 3G pitches £0.8m	£7k (deficit)	£182k (deficit)
4. New facility with Gym, changing rooms and 3G pitches	Larger single building than current footprints. 50 station Gym facility, dance studios and new 3G pitches. New building to have bar/café facility. Improvements to pitches.	Building/car parking £7.8m 3G pitches £0.8m	£269k (surplus)	£290k (deficit)

3.5. The members of the Panel were strongly of the view they would like the Playing Fields to continue as a public sports facility and would support some development of the playing fields to provide funding for the works needed to make the playing fields sustainable. The Panel's recommendations at their meeting in May were as follows.

"1. That the option to seek planning permission for an enabling development on the Playing Fields site be pursued.

² This includes the financial cost of borrowing to finance the necessary capital investment

2. *For a report to go to Cabinet in order to agree for the Director of Resources to procure planning consultants in order to assess the feasibility of submitting an application for enabling development.*
3. *That the report also asks Cabinet to agree funding of the initial costs, up to £50,000, for the planning consultant work."*

3.6. Undertaking some residential development on the playing fields site will be very challenging. The whole site is in the Green Belt, and therefore the Council, as applicant, would have to argue very special circumstances for any development. It would be for the Planning Committee to determine whether special circumstances exist and to weigh this against all other factors (albeit with the requirement to notify the Secretary of State to consider call-in if they decide in favour of development).

3.7. Any case would need to demonstrate:

- A clear need which is specific to the circumstances of the site/area and cannot be provided elsewhere.
- Need supported by the relevant sporting bodies.
- The required sporting development to be essential and of small scale (i.e. meets the tests in the NPPF for development in the Green Belt) and designed, positioned and landscaped appropriately.
- The investment needed demonstrated as not being able to be met through means other than enabling development (for example no funding through the appropriate sporting bodies, national lottery or by the Council or local users).
- The enabling development is to only provide capital investment and scaled appropriately to only secure the necessary investment and forms a policy compliant proposal (e.g. affordable housing requirement).
- A business case to demonstrate that the sports uses will be financially self-sustaining and viable with this one-off injection of capital.

3.8 If members were minded to consider the enabling development option, a specialist planning consultant should be appointed to build a case to justify the very special circumstances.

4. Consultation

Not applicable at this stage. If an enabling development is considered viable then a pre planning public consultation exercise would be undertaken.

5. Options

5.1 The report to the Panel demonstrated that do nothing is not an option. If enabling development is not considered an option the choices for the Council are to:

- Close the playing fields facilities with the exception of the facilities leased to Softball UK and Unity MA, or
- Finance the development by borrowing and accept this would be a cost to the council tax payer.

6. Corporate Implications

- 6.1 Financial – The current operation of the playing fields is not financial sustainable, costing the Trust/Council in excess of £100,000 per annum. The minimum investment needed in the site is probably in the order of £4m, the financing costs of which would be around £200,000 per annum based on PWLB borrowing and a 40 year asset life. Other sources of income, e.g. grants from sports bodies, would not cover this minimum level of investment.
- 6.2 As the playing fields are seen as an important part of the open spaces leisure provision in the District it is reasonable for the Council to fund the proposed feasibility work.
- 6.3 An enabling development is very challenging in planning terms and therefore the feasibility of developing a case for exceptional circumstances needs to be tested before submission of an application. Legal advice is being obtained on what would be required to demonstrate exceptional circumstances.
- 6.4 The viability of an enabling development option needs to be established in the autumn, as if it is not viable plans will need to be put in place to close facilities at the playing fields in 2019.

7. Links to Council Policy Objectives

- 7.1 The facilities at the Playing Fields support the Council's key aims in relation to working towards safe and healthier local communities. They support the general public health agenda promoted by Government and sports bodies. The site is identified in the Playing Pitches and Open Spaces Strategy as a key site, and is also considered by Sport England to be an important site. Sensitive use of the site helps to conserve the environment and open space nature of the facility. Improved usage of the site also would make it less vulnerable to traveller incursions.

8. Next Steps

If the recommendation to explore enabling development is agreed:

- A brief will be prepared and circulated to planning agents familiar with South Bucks seeking proposals to fulfil the brief.
- Proposals evaluated and appointment made by October
- Completion of brief by end of year

If enabling development is not to be explored and the Council decides not to finance the investment required, then plans will be put in place to reduce the facilities at the playing fields to reduce net operating costs by April 2019