

FULL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RQA was commissioned in June 2006 by the Sport and Leisure Committee of the Heathfield Partnership Trust to undertake a Feasibility Study for the possible development of an indoor swimming pool and associated facilities in Heathfield within Wealden District.

The Feasibility Study addresses needs and demand, site options and development analysis before considering the capital and revenue implications, the strategic and funding issues which critically need to be overcome by the Heathfield Partnership Trust if it is to take the project forward.

1. The Brief and Methodology

The brief and agreed methodology for undertaking this Feasibility Study has included:

- a needs and demand analysis of the potential catchment of the proposed facilities in Heathfield drawing from existing research and undertaking wider geo-demographic research of identified local conurbations and rural areas;
- an audit of existing community and leisure facilities that may be complementary or compete with the proposed indoor swimming pool and ancillary facilities within the defined catchment area;
- a summary review of the issues related to each of the individual elements of the facilities considered for inclusion in order to arrive at the proposed facility mix and schedule of accommodation;
- sequential analysis of identified sites at the Tower Recreation Ground, at The Heathfield Community Centre, Sheepsetting Lane, and at the Heathfield Community College, the site of the existing Heathfield Leisure Centre;
- institutional and community consultations were undertaken, drawing from and supplementing the extensive consultation exercise already undertaken by the Heathfield Area Pool Initiative (HAPI) between 2003 and 2006; these included discussions with Leisure, Planning, Transport and Environment Officers of Wealden District and/or East Sussex County Council, and with community representatives;
- consideration of potential facility, access and car parking configurations at the preferred site;
- outline assessments of capital and revenue cost implications for the facility options reviewed, i.e. the revenue sensitivities of a stand alone facility compared to further development of the Heathfield Leisure Centre site;

- examination of potential funding templates and the particular strategic issues and partnership requirements to overcome the barriers to such a development; and
- a suggested way forward and next steps for the Heathfield Partnership Trust.

2. Participation Trends and Catchment Issues

National population projections, reflected in the sub-region, are for decreasing numbers of young people and increasing numbers of older people. There is increasing emphasis and media focus on improving the health of the nation to decrease the level of obesity in children and adults. Swimming, fitness and exercise play an important role in delivering this objective as confirmed by the results of the General Household Survey (2002), commissioned by the National Office of Statistics, and by the Active People Survey (2006) commissioned by Sport England.

While residents of Heathfield and its rural environs are able to access indoor swimming pools within a 20-30 minute drive-time catchment, there is an unserved catchment for swimming of some 20,000 people within a 15-minute drive-time of Heathfield (Source: CACI Ltd 2006). There are areas in central, north, south and east of Heathfield as identified which do not fall within a 15-minute drive-time of an existing community swimming pool in Uckfield, Hailsham or Crowborough. Some 25% of that population has indicated that they would swim on average 5 times per month (HAPI Survey, 2003). Catchment maps and participation profiles are contained at Appendix B.

There is strong reliance on car use for leisure related journeys due to the rural nature of the District and public transport that does not match the time and flexibility requirements for such journeys. This is exacerbated by difficult country road and night time driving.

There is a high propensity within this catchment area for residents to participate in swimming and fitness gym/studio activities (Source: CACI Ltd). The catchment 'gap' in public sector provision within a 15 minute drive time suggests that there is also a latent demand for an indoor community swimming pool within Heathfield in addition to the expressed demand identified.

Research by the Heathfield Area Pool Initiative (HAPI) has also demonstrated strong support for a local indoor community swimming pool from residents of the Heathfield and surrounding villages (Heathfield, Broad Oak, Horam, Punnetts Town, Waldron, Mayfield, Dallington, Burwash, Etchington), by community groups and by the local family of primary schools. The level of support identified is detailed within Section 2.

Freedom Leisure reports that demand for swimming lessons is growing and unsatisfied in some ability and age categories. There is an increasing demand for lane swimming among the over 45s commensurate with the media profile of the healthy living message. Certain peak time sessions at the Hailsham and Uckfield pools are unable to cater for demand.

There are a number of primary schools, many within the Heathfield ‘family’, that require closer access to an indoor swimming pool, where travel time and affordability are most important considerations.

Demand has been expressed by users of the Heathfield Leisure Centre for a larger fitness gym with additional, more varied equipment, accessible at an affordable price. Higher levels of membership would result.

The three Isenhurst Health and Fitness Clubs, offering a more exclusive environment, consider that the provision of a 25m indoor swimming pool and an additional 40 station fitness gym in Heathfield would not have an undue impact on their 15m pools and their existing membership levels. The market would potentially sustain a public and a private sector fitness gym in Heathfield, subject to location.

The existing outdoor small pool at Heathfield Community College, built some 40 years ago, is reaching the end of its life, with increasing maintenance costs supported by the College, the Heathfield and District Sports Association (HASDA) and the Parish Council. It does not begin to accommodate the needs and demand for swimming expressed by the Heathfield community.

3. Facilities and Site Options

From our assessment of needs and demand, the optimum accommodation for the proposed new facilities is proposed as:

- a 25m x 4-lane pool with associated storage
- changing village
- fitness gym (35-40 stations)
- studio (for aerobics/dance)
- foyer, reception and circulation areas
- associated entrance and car parking area.

The fitness gym and aerobics studio provide a synergy with exercise and fitness related programmes linked to the swimming pool. This would increase levels of use and assist in reducing the net operating deficit of a stand alone swimming pool.

Development initiatives in Heathfield are constrained by designation of 60% of the District as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) including the High Weald AONB to the north of Heathfield and the South Downs AONB, proposed to become a National Park, to the south.

Based on sequential planning analysis and the financial feasibility projections as outlined within Section 3 (and Appendix D) and Section 5 of the Study respectively, we consider that the Tower Recreation Ground site and the Community Centre at Sheepsetting Lane do not present economically viable solutions and recommend therefore that they are discounted.

The site in Heathfield offering potential economic viability for a 25m x 4 lane indoor community swimming pool and ancillary facilities is the Heathfield Leisure Centre/Community College site. This is subject to further financial assessments by the operator (Freedom Leisure) within the context of its wider contract with Wealden District Council for the management of the District's sports and leisure centres. This site is large enough to accommodate the mix of facilities proposed, including dedicated car parking.

Traffic congestion, car parking and visual intrusion are issues of genuine concern to local residents. The provision of a swimming pool should not add to these problems, which are due to traffic peaking at College arrival and departure times. The swimming pool operation would be programmed so as not to add to these peaks. Existing congestion should be ameliorated by the School Travel Plan in preparation by East Sussex County Council Transport and Environment Department and the College, linking with the actions proposed within the Heathfield Local Area Transport Strategy.

The visual impact of building and light intrusion would be minimised through site orientation, environmentally sensitive design of the building, and use of low spillage lighting. Indicative site orientation and building drawings are described within Section 4 and Appendix F.

4. Capital and Revenue Cost Implications

The capital cost of providing a swimming pool, fitness gym and ancillary facilities is estimated at between £1.9 and £2.1 million at present day prices, excluding professional fees at some 12-15%. VAT is not included in these figures as the lead partner, as yet not identified, may be exempt subject to appropriate discussion with HM Revenue and Customs.

We consider that a 'stand alone' 25m swimming pool and fitness gym operated within the public sector in Heathfield, would be high risk and unviable. Projected ongoing revenue costs would be minimised by co-location with the existing Leisure Centre and Dual Use with the College, as shown within Section 5 of the Study.

Existing small, ageing, school outdoor learner swimming pools have a limited life expectancy and will not have a detrimental impact on the community use or viability of a 25m indoor community pool if provided in Heathfield.

The indicative revenue projections (Section 5) for a stand alone swimming pool and fitness gym (median year scenario in Year 3) reflect an operating deficit of between £156,000 (Optimum - probable outturn) and £242,600 (cautious, or worst case scenario), including an allowance for a Sinking Fund contribution. We have estimated that, if the same facilities were located annexed to the Heathfield Leisure Centre, the indicative revenue position for the equivalent new facilities, taking account of impacts on income generation and possible savings, could be improved by some £98,500. This figure takes no account of the existing subsidy for the Heathfield Leisure Centre which, were it to continue at the current level, would further benefit consideration of this site.

Freedom Leisure, the contracted Leisure Trust which operates HLC, would need to provide their own estimates for the overall financial operating position, set against the enhanced community benefits, of the Heathfield Leisure Centre incorporating a swimming pool and larger fitness gym, in the context of their wider remit and portfolio of leisure centre management operations in Wealden District.

5. Strategic Issues

An indoor swimming pool for Heathfield is not a declared objective within the leisure strategies of Wealden District and East Sussex County Council.

Wealden District Council's broader policies are aimed at achieving an ongoing annual reduction in revenue support for leisure, which may or may not be compatible with further facility provision. Officers also confirmed that there are no capital resources identified within the Council's medium-term financial plan to support the provision of further leisure facilities in Heathfield or elsewhere in the District.

Current WDC priorities are to increase the level of housing, particularly social housing, in the south of the District, with the presumption that the leisure needs of these expanded communities would be met by developer contributions.

East Sussex County Council recognises the potential relatively short lifespan of the current outdoor pool at Heathfield Community College (placed at one year by the Council's consultant engineers), but has no plans or resources for refurbishment or reinvestment in swimming.

The Heathfield and Waldron Parish Council does not have the strategic responsibility for the provision of indoor leisure facilities, nor the capital resources to be a primary funding partner.

The Parish Council has acted responsibly and cost effectively in the development of community facilities, including the development of the Tower Recreation Ground, providing two much-needed football pitches for the town, and in the provision of the Heathfield Community Centre in partnership with the (East) Sussex Downs and Weald Primary Care Trust.

6. Capital Funding

Traditional funding templates involving local authority strategic support and provision, sometimes in partnership with the education authority for joint use facilities, are not applicable in this case. Traditional funding templates are outlined in Section 6 of the Study.

If the Heathfield Partnership Trust wishes to continue to seek the provision of a community pool, its funding strategy must rely on a partnership approach which brings in a number of stakeholders rather than a single primary funder. Examples discussed within the Study include:

- Local community fund-raising
- A local benefactor

Charitable trusts
Foundation for Sport and the Arts
Developer contributions
Borrowing and loan funding.

7. Revenue Funding

We have demonstrated within this Study that by combining an indoor swimming pool with existing facilities and adding a larger fitness gym at Heathfield Leisure Centre at the Community College, it is possible to reduce annual revenue costs substantially compared with free-standing provision. However, there can be no long-term guarantee that expenditure can be matched by income. During the life of a swimming pool, it will need major refurbishment, plant and building structure replacement.

Again, conventional methods of funding or ‘subsidising’ such community facilities via the local authority will be challenging if they are to go beyond the level of existing contribution currently available, subject to any future discussions involving WDC’s leisure management contractor that may be initiated. Long term commitment to the high revenue costs projected is unlikely to be forthcoming from any other source.

8. The Way Forward

The Feasibility Study has considered the way forward to deliver an indoor swimming pool for public community use in Heathfield. Although providing a pool may be desirable, the practical difficulties of delivery may be very significant in the current policy and financial climates. In order to move from the feasibility stage to an implementation strategy, the necessary next steps are summarised as:

Determine Project Leadership/ Ownership – It will be necessary to decide which agency is the most likely lead partner to move the project forward. This could be the Partnership itself, the Parish Council, Freedom Leisure, or a consortium of willing partners including Wealden District Council and East Sussex County Council. The lead body will in due course be accountable for fund-raising, commissioning and funding further works, lease holding, and other legal matters, and therefore needs to be an incorporated body preferably with a credible track record of delivering such community projects.

Confirm the Capital Funding Strategy – The lead body needs to draw up a credible strategy to raise partnership funding probably in excess of £2 million. This will be by a combination of local fund-raising, identifying and bringing on board benefactors if these exist, applying to relevant funding bodies or Charities and other sources of funding.

Develop the Business Plan – This Feasibility Study has outlined the likely demand, use, costs and income from the proposed facility. A detailed Business Plan needs to be developed from this outline, in order to demonstrate to any potential benefactor or funder that the project has a reasonable prospect of long-term viability and will meet community needs and aspirations.

Confirm a Revenue Funding Strategy – A revenue funding strategy needs to be prepared to accommodate an anticipated requirement for an annual revenue subsidy, and to ensure that there is a commitment to meet this cost. The involvement of Freedom Leisure or other operator partner to verify these revenue projections would add to their credibility in the eyes of any potential funder.

Strengthen the Support of Wealden District Council and East Sussex County Council – The partner stakeholders would need to work alongside Officers and elected members of these democratic bodies in order to reinforce the potential community and learning benefits of, and demonstrated needs and demand for, a community swimming pool in Heathfield, and in this way seek to change current policies and strategies.

9. Practical Issues

In addition to the above strategic issues, there are a number of practical issues which need to be resolved in the short-term. These include:

- a. *Resolve Ownership and Lease Arrangements* – The County Council has indicated a willingness, in principle, to lease the identified land for the purpose of building a pool. This ‘in principle’ agreement needs to be translated into a firm proposal. Given that the current leisure centre lease is held by the District Council, issues such as who will be the lessee, site rental, relationship to the existing lease, conditions of tenure, for example, need to be resolved.
- b. *Traffic Impact Assessment* –Traffic planning and site management arrangements need to be put in place to satisfy concerned residents. This should be done by a joint Traffic Impact Assessment carried out by the Highway Authority, the College and Freedom Leisure.
- c. *Progress a Planning Application* – In order to ensure that the development is acceptable within the Local Development Framework a Planning Application for the development would need to be submitted. This would allow the views of supporters and opponents to be tested and, if necessary, conditions on operation to be imposed.
- d. *Produce a More Detailed Design* – As part of this Study, Saville Jones Architects have produced an outline indicative design. To move closer to cost and planning certainty, a more detailed set of plans would be required.
- e. *Produce Funding Application Documents* – If the funding strategy involves any applications to external funding partners, a set of supporting documents to back up any applications will be required.

RQA and Saville Jones Architects would be pleased to assist the Heathfield Partnership Trust in progressing some of these next steps if required.