

Potential Developments at Birchwood Leisure Centre in Hatfield

These notes have been prepared to show why alterations for Sporting facilities should be restricted to developing no more than minor improvements but which will increase the scope of opportunities available for Hatfield Town Council to hire out the facilities by being able to offer to the public a wider range of Sporting and Leisure opportunities than merely football.

Purpose of this Report

To comment on activities put forward for developing Birchwood in recent years, and make conclusions about the way forward.

The Birchwood Site

The site can be divided into two parts, basically, one being land controlled through a Trust, and the other being land owned and managed by Hatfield Town Council.

The thrust of this Report is based on proposals that affect the Trust land, and land owned by Hatfield Town Council will be dealt with in a separate Report.

History from 2017

Two pre-application advices were received from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Planning Department: one dated 26 September 2017 and the other dated 13 September 2018.

Both proposals put forward that were the subjects of these advices included drawings which are not readily available to be able to use in the preparation of this Report.

Both proposals included for Hatfield Town Football Club to be beneficiaries of the hoped for eventual Planning Permissions although the Club did not nor does it now have a valid pecuniary interest in the site and were not even licensees at Birchwood when either of these Applications were made. Hatfield Town Council was included as part of the proposals when the Application for Advice was received on 26 September 2017 but was not included on the Advice that was given on 13 September 2018.

Both Applications included proposals for residential accommodation as well as sporting facilities and Advice given to both of the Advices Applications for the residential and sporting uses can be identified. The comments associated with the Sporting facilities have been extracted and used as the basis for the preparation of this submission.

As a result of an ongoing local planning inspectorate investigation regarding housing in the district the Birchwood site has been eliminated from housing proposals. The sporting and leisure facilities comments have been extracted from the Advices and this Report has been based on those comments as affecting the Trust land.

The cost for the preparation of the scheme in 26 September 2017 Advice was about £35,000 but the planning fee is not known.

Any cost relating to the scheme in 13 September 2018 Advice are not known.

This submission is for the proposals to develop Birchwood to be abandoned on the grounds that the costs incurred so far are excessive with very little to show for it other than being able to extract some guidance on what could be developed at Birchwood for sporting facilities albeit it would be as a very low key operation.

In both of the responses from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Planning Department responses were received from various consultees namely Sport England, Hertfordshire Constabulary, Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue (who would require a section 106 agreement to be part of their approval), Historic Environment Adviser, Thames Water (who were particularly worried about the effect on the drainage from the site), Hertfordshire Transport Programmes and Strategy, Hertfordshire County Council Development Services (who would require section 106 agreements for local primary schools, The Breaks Manor Youth Centre and other similar educational type of services). Hertfordshire Ecology also responded as did Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Landscapes Department, NHS Clinical Commissioning and Highways England.

The Advices made the point that responses were not received from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Public Health and Protection, Affinity Water, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Community Partnerships, and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Parking Manager.

The Key Issues

The key issues to be taken into account on the development on the site would be the principal proposed uses, design and character, amenity, amenity of adjoining owners, parking requirements planning obligations.

Planning Designation of Land

The Trust site is designated as Urban Open Land and Sport England will have an important input into proposals for developing the site. Note that comments from the Planning Authority have been made against a background of a large fenced off area and floodlighting included in the schemes so sound and lighting pollution will need to be taken into account and shown that these are not problems in properly prepared reports as part of any Planning Application.

Regarding pitches and leisure, the improvement in quality envisaged in the pre-Application Advice Applications is to support in principle. But asserted the need to replace Birchwood's sports facilities is not in accordance with the Council's sports facilities survey of 2011. Therefore, any Planning Application must be supported by evidence of why the leisure centre needs to be redeveloped including considerations of improvement in quality.

Sport England

Sport England requested information in support of the proposal to demonstrate that lost playing fields would be replaced with equivalent facilities better quality, quantity and accessibility and that any development is for an indoor or outdoor sports facility of sufficient benefit to outweigh the loss of the playing field. In order to assess proposals they have requested information including: –
 playing pitch layouts;
 playing field use (details of users, how long they use them and security of tenure);
 Schedule of facilities at the existing Birchwood Sports and Leisure Indoor Sports Facilities;
 an explanation of the need the proposal would address and potential community benefits;

an explanation of Stadium football facilities (users, surface FA grading levels, community access, sporting facilities);
 an explanation of indoor Stadium sport facilities;
 Rugby facilities-pitches and facilities;
 displaced playing pitches - how the apparent net loss would be mitigated through the scheme;
 facilities management;
 phasing;
 stakeholder engagement

The Advice was to contact Sport England's representative directly to discuss these requirements prior to making a Planning Application but there are no records that any such contact has been made, not only with Sport England but with any of the other authorities mentioned above

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

The later advice for more information came from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. It says that the Council has concerns over the flexibility of use of the proposed pitches between different sports notably rugby and hockey which have their own pitch size and surface requirements. Advice was given to check the size requirements for these sports and ensure they can be accommodated within the proposed on-site provisions.

The Council would expect the proposed pitches to be available for use by the community in addition to Hatfield Football Club and Hatfield Football Club junior teams.

There is a requirement to prepare a Financial Statement to accompany any Planning Application, which has not yet emerged although one has been asked for by the Full Council at Hatfield Town Council several times in the last 18 months.

There will also be the requirement to pay increased Business Rates because a fenced in proposal will be regarded as a private commercial entity.

The message that comes from the above is that there is scope to be able to undertake development of some kind on the site and that it will be limited to being a very low key development.

It would also be important to ensure that whatever development that is undertaken, the site is maintained as an open area and that also will need to be supported by the Charities Commission. The playing of sport on Trust land is to be maintained, and the enclosure of any part of Trust land is not likely to be approved.

My Submission

I submit that the priority is to ensure that the facilities available at Birchwood at present together with the openness of the site for members of the public to use must be maintained although I submit that very low key minor development could probably be approved but will still need to face the rigours of any proposed development that would contain proposals to enclose the site with a solid fence and install floodlights.

The time scale for implementing the proposals such as those contained in the 2017 and 2018 pre-Application Advice Applications is likely to be years bearing in mind the Sport England requirements for alternative facilities to a better standard than exist at Birchwood, which are to be up and running before Sport England would agree to release Birchwood in preparation for undertaking whatever work would be needed to satisfy any Planning Permission that might be issued in consequence of the 2017 and 2018 Decisions.

On the financial side, it is planned that grants will be available for installing the structural works. But these grants do not cater for the ongoing maintenance, insurance, increased rates, and administration. These will be left for the Town Council to pay. It will be necessary to add something to the hire fees to cover these costs since it should not fall to the taxpayers and others who use the other Birchwood facilities to pay increased costs for these proposals.

I object to anything that destroys the Urban Open Land and the Trust land facilities available at present at Birchwood because the obstacles are too numerous and onerous to surmount in order to satisfy the the number of people that will benefit from it. It is also my submission that there are far more people who would feel the loss of Birchwood facilities than would benefit from the loss of openness enjoyed by people now.

The increased costs to be passed on to hirers and others is unacceptable, which is a reason to object to these proposals on their own.

Cllr Richard Griffiths
17th July 2021