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## ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, CULTURE AND SPORTS COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 7 November 2023.

**PRESENT:** Councillor Julia Neden-Watts (Chair), Councillor John Coombs, Councillor Elizabeth Gant, Councillor Alan Juriansz, Councillor Zoe McLeod, Councillor Fiona Sacks, Councillor Chris Varley and Councillor Chas Warlow

### 21. COUNCILLOR MARTIN ELENGORN

Members had been saddened to learn, prior to the start of the meeting, of the passing of Martin Elengorn, Vice-chair of the committee. Martin was a long-standing and distinguished councillor. Tribute would be paid to him in the Council meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2023.

### 22. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies on this occasion.

### 23. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

### 24. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and the Chair authorised to sign them.

### 25. WARD CONCERNS

None.

### 26. PETITIONS

None.

### 27. OPTIONS FOR NEW PUBLIC TOILETS AT RICHMOND TOWN CENTRE

The Director of Environment and Community Services advised that traffic engineers had examined a range of options and the shortlist of options which might be taken forward for more detailed work were included in the report.

Mr Peter Willan, representing the Friends of Richmond Green, was invited to address the meeting. He stated that there were 340 households around the Green who supported the assessment of the options. Urination in public open spaces was an important and significant issue for residents and visitors. He had no particular view to press on the choice of options in the report.

When questioned for clarification, Mr Willan stated that a suggestion of a building on the Green would not be supported, but there was positive support for the option of the lending Library. It was noted that Richmond Green was Metropolitan Open Land. The Director commented that while the report recommended further work, this could in itself reveal difficulties on the site.

Mr Martin Baker was invited to address the meeting. He commented that public toilet provision in the UK compared poorly against the high availability in Australia. He considered that signs for the Community Toilet Scheme (CTS) in shops were not sufficiently striking and there should be common stickers across these and other public toilets. He stated that the 'Visit Richmond' link to the online map was still not working. He asked why time and effort had been spent in this report looking at options in shops.

The Director acknowledged Mr Baker's point on the CTS. He advised that not much time had been spent on the less viable shop options. He emphasised that the Council was looking to invest in public toilets and the report represented new options following a decline in public toilet provision.

In response to questions, the committee heard that local amenity groups would be involved in future. For the Hill Rise/Petersham Road option, the focus would be on the end closest to the town centre and river. For Lower George Street, it was likely that the provision next to the florist would be small. It was thought perverse to disrupt local businesses.

Speaking in his capacity as a Ward Councillor, Councillor Varley stated that the report was welcomed by the local community. He was given assurance that local stakeholder groups such as the Richmond Society and Friends of Richmond Green would be included in future discussions alongside Ward councillors and others.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. To note the various proposals that have been considered in Section 4 of the report.**
- 2. To agree to the next steps identified in paragraph 4.58 and 4.59.**

**28. POOLS ON THE PARK - HEALTH SUITE**

The Assistant Director of Environment and Community Services (Leisure) advised that a new Leisure Strategy was being developed, which supported the Sport England Strategy to encourage as many people as possible to participate in physical activity and was inclusive for all. This report recommended the re-purpose of the Health Suite as an Exercise Studio to enable wider participation.

Philippa Edmunds, the swimming representative at Pools on the Park, was invited to address the meeting. She noted that the swimming pools were much appreciated and that the Health Suite was very popular. 80% of consultation responses had indicated that they wanted the Health Suite replaced and she asked why a Health Suite was right for other pools in the area but not for Richmond. She considered private clubs to be too expensive and that the Health Suite fitted with the policy to get older people active. Referring to paragraph 9.3 of the report, she was disappointed that benefits of a Health Suite had not been analysed. She concluded by stating that people had given up their memberships or not joined as the Health Suite was closed.

Alan Fransman was invited to address the meeting. (Mr Fransman had also submitted a written question and the reply is appended to these minutes). He thought that many would say that the recommendation was based on flawed advice and that the Health Suite fitted the aim of a healthier Borough as it helped with physical activity for those who were disabled. The Health Suite would generate income as members returned and by attracting new members. He reported that Hounslow Council had looked at de-carbonisation measures. He considered that an infra-red sauna would be more efficient and leaving out a spa bath would save some £23,000. He concluded by stating that there was clear evidence of demand for a Health Suite and noted that Studio 2 at Pools on the Park was currently in use as an office.

In response to questions for clarification, Mr Fransman said that there was an infra-red sauna in Isleworth Leisure Centre and that he had done a rough calculation on the cost of the spa bath, noting that chlorine and heating would add to the costs.

Mary Higgins was invited to address the meeting and stated that she was speaking on her own account as a long-standing member of Pools on the Park. She reported that while many were no longer members as they had been denied a spa, she noted the importance of the Health Suite as a social hub where friendships were made. This countered loneliness and improved wellbeing. She spoke of the rehabilitation opportunity provided by the Health Suite and medical evidence for the benefits of cold water swimming and saunas. She concluded by saying that investment in a Health

Suite would provide payback for the Council.

Martin Baker was invited to address the meeting. He considered that closure of the Health Suite was a disgrace and had been sacrificed for net-zero. He said that it had taken two years for survey result to be made public and that contractors had already stripped the room back to a shell. He suggested that there was a deliberate strategy to prevent re-use of the Health Suite. He said that Freedom of Information requests had been refused. He reported that survey results showed that 84% of member respondents wanted to see the health suite restored. 54% used the Health Suite and 68% of non-members wanted the facility retained. He considered this to be overwhelming support and many would not renew membership without the Health Suite. He concluded by saying that he expected the committee would vote for this unpopular proposal.

In response to a question for clarification, Mr Baker said that costs to strip back the room had not been disclosed.

Councillor Hale came forward to address the committee. His concerns centred on the health perspective and affordability. He suggested that the whole site could be looked at as an affordable wellbeing centre. Work should be undertaken with the voluntary sector to bring people to the centre. He concluded by stating that the report did not encapsulate solidly the business case for not retaining the spa and asked if more customers would be interested if it was kept.

Responding to the speakers, the Assistant Director acknowledged the common theme of the benefits of a spa but highlighted the latent demand for an Exercise Studio and Fitness Suite. He further noted the need for better marketing and increasing numbers of new members for Pools on the Park. He stated the need to help those who are currently inactive and to provide space for those coming from hospital into new health pathways, citing the subsidised hydro-therapy pool in Teddington Leisure Centre.

In debate, the committee heard that latent demand analysis and benchmarking against other assets in the Borough showed potential growth at Pools on the Park supporting a fitness offer. There was no recognised tool to assess demand for a spa as such public facilities are rare. The potential to consider a spa in another location would depend on available capital funding and demand as such a facility was more costly than an exercise studio. Any building retrofit would depend on investment in a sustainable solution. Raising of membership fees to achieve this could be considered but this could be significant in order to bridge the gap. Consultations have shown that flexible use would be the best solution for the space at Pools on the Park. Annual attendances at the Health Suite for the period April 2016 to December 2019 varied from 154 to 481, but it was difficult to quantify general member usage as these did not generate additional income. While the leisure sector was taking time to recover post pandemic, swimming was now exceeding pre-pandemic numbers. Health programmes and pathways for the Exercise Centre would be formalised with GPs and there could be an opportunity to explore wider opportunities with existing private spa facilities. The aging existing Health Suite was not fit for purpose and a group exercise facility would allow more people to participate. This new facility would allow work with health partners for individual rehabilitation pre- and post-surgery. Once the investment was made in the Exercise Studio, it would have lower operating costs and provide better revenue. The Council had no data from Hounslow on the running costs of the Isleworth spa but it was noted that utilities were expensive. There as also the challenge of using a listed building in Richmond and the Exercise Studio would be better on sustainability for Pools on the Park.

It was moved, seconded and agreed that a second recommendation be considered and a commitment to an assessment on whether there should be a longer-term aspiration for the strategy to include the provision of a larger, higher quality and more sustainable Health Suite in the Borough.

On a vote, the recommendations were carried by a majority with six votes in favour and two against.

**RESOLVED:**

1. To approve Option 2 and replace the Health Suite with a new Group Exercise Studio.
2. To ensure that Officers commit (as detailed in paragraph 9.3 of the report) to a full feasibility study to be undertaken as part of the leisure strategy development, to assess whether there should be a longer-term aspiration for the strategy to include the provision of a larger, higher quality and more sustainable Health Suite, on an alternative site, that would add more commercial value in the long-term. (The feasibility study to include work with Health Partners to understand the benefits and need for a Health Suite).

## 29. ADOPTION OF THE RICHMOND UPON THAMES PLAYING PITCH AND OUTDOOR SPORTS STRATEGY

The Spatial Planning and Design Team Manager, accompanied by the Principal Policy and Information Planner, introduced the report. It was highlighted that the strategy had the endorsement of all relevant national bodies and addressed planning challenges. Key findings for each sport were included and any shortfall addressed. It was noted that not all sports could be covered and that for example basketball could be part of a future update to the indoor sports strategy. The assessment represented a snapshot in time and a steering group would be convened following the committee's discussion of this report.

Mr Benjamin Addy, a new resident, was invited to address the meeting. He considered that there was a focus on traditional sports in the Borough and a lack of facilities aimed at younger people. He gave outdoor basketball as an example, citing the facilities at Clapham Common as a good model. Kneller Gardens had good facilities. He commented that skateboarding was now an Olympic sport. He asked that the Council give young people something to do in what are now recognised sports. He stated that facilities should be in the forefront of towns and not hidden away.

Mr James Merchant of community club, Knights Basketball, was invited to address the meeting. He stated that basketball had been a success in the Borough since 2009 and was a notable hub for the sport in the country. Although traditionally an indoor sport, basketball was now a hugely popular outdoor pastime. Christ's School were national champions. Some local people had won scholarships in the U.S.A. There was a need for safe, fit-for-purpose space for the sport. Facilities at Kneller Gardens exemplified this need. He concluded by asking for basketball to be considered as an outdoor sport and not just included in MUGAs (multi use games areas).

In responding to a question for clarification, Mr Merchant replied that Kneller Gardens' court was not full-scale but introductory. He mentioned Clapham Common as a great example of a basketball facility. He considered that it would be good to improve the quality of some existing courts in the Borough.

Councillor Hale came forward to address the committee. He explained that he worked as a rowing coach and that the river was a shared space with clubs and sites operated from within and outside the Borough. Prior to lockdown, some fifty clubs were using the river. Paddleboarders and wild swimmers had not been considered in the report and there was a need to find out more about these users. He considered that all sites needed to be looked at again.

The Spatial Planning and Design Team Manager acknowledged that certain sports were not represented. Although the focus had been on traditional sports, it would be possible to pick up more of the 'newer' sports. The Chair, who was aware of the popularity of basketball from members of her own family, stated that it was important to work across Council services, noting that analysis was awaited of a consultation on young people's use of parks.

In debate, committee members raised the issue of women's sport and access to pitches, the balance between access by affiliated sports and social sports and capturing information about emerging sports. Officers advised that the strategy considered women's sport where there were dedicated teams. From the Planning perspective, the strategy was led by Sport England's

methodology but latent demand and where sport was displaced had been considered. Members were reminded that the Women's Rugby World Cup would be held in the Borough in 2025. Emerging sports would need different types of facilities and opportunities might be presented through planning negotiations. There were also conversations with schools and the local community. Neighbouring facilities were also considered. For community use agreements, there is more emphasis in the emerging Local Plan. Guidance could be produced to ensure there are clearer details on the amount and nature of community use that will be secured when considering planning applications.

The committee considered that not every need could be met and that the strategy was primarily a Planning document. However, it acted as a useful springboard to other strategies. Planning policies would also protect environmental areas affected by, for example, floodlighting.

Officers confirmed that they would be setting up "Stage E: Deliver the Strategy and keep it robust and up to date" meetings of the steering group and would communicate this to ward councillors to gather their input.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. To approve and adopt the principles of the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy (Appendix 1) and its accompanying Assessment Report (Appendix 2).**
- 2. To delegate authority to the Assistant Director of Environment and Community Services (Planning and Transport) and the Assistant Director of Environment and Community Services (Leisure), in consultation with the Chair of the Environment, Sustainability, Culture and Sports Committee to agree the final publication versions or any updates/issues to be taken forward through review and monitoring updates to the Playing Pitch & Outdoor Sports Strategy / Action Plan.**

**30. Q2 QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORT**

In discussion, the Committee was advised that there was an anticipated budget overspend at this stage. The capital allocation for Climate Change initiatives had been allocated to the 'Library of things', Hampton Library and transport schemes. There would be an annual report for committee on this issue in February 2024. It was noted that there would be an additional Tree Officer appointed. For cemeteries, there was an overspend through the use of agency staff, being used to meet demand for the service. This would be further examined.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. To note that the current revenue budget projected overspend on the services for this committee is £844,000.**
- 2. To note the latest position on the capital programme.**

**31. FORWARD PLAN**

The Committee indicated that it was keen to receive a date for an update on progress on delivery of the Richmond Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan, including presenting the carbon emissions for Richmond Council as an organisation.

It was noted that the Forward Plan contained an entry concerning an options appraisal for Leisure Services. This would be presented as an interim report in January 2024, with the Leisure Strategy itself coming forward in Spring 2024.

Members requested further information on the Cemeteries and Registrars Services as this was an area within the committee's remit, where they had not previously received a substantive report.

The Committee considered that it had no items to refer to the Policy and Performance Review

Board at this stage.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee AGREE the Forward Plan for committee business, subject to amendments and additions discussed.**

**CHAIR**

The meeting, which started at 7.20 pm ended at 9.29 pm.

**Environment, Sustainability, Culture and Sport Committee****7 November 2023****Item 7 Pools on the Park – Health Suite**

Mr Alan Fransman submitted a written question on this item, as follows,

“Point 9.1 of the report to councillors notes the consultation exercise in August 2021 in which 78% of respondents were in favour of replacing the existing Health Suite with new environmentally sustainable facilities and to maintain the area as a Health Suite facility.

What is the Committee and the Council’s responsibility to residents, members and voters who pay for these facilities through our leisure centre subscriptions, council tax payments and tax contributions that fund the Government grant to the Council.”

The response is as follows,

“The council has a responsibility to deliver a wide range of services including those that are statutory services to its residents, however leisure facilities are non-statutory, meaning the council has discretion in how they are delivered. All local authorities are under increasing budgetary constraints and therefore have to make decisions that balance the provision of statutory and non-statutory services.

In this case the provision of leisure services remains of great importance to this administration as this supports the health and wellbeing of our residents. Our leisure facilities offer a wide range of opportunities for residents to keep active and healthy, and we want to ensure that our services are as inclusive and accessible throughout a residents’ life course. Therefore, the committee agreed to invest in a group exercises studio to support the Council’s ambitions to get more people active, more often. In addition, the new facility will allow a strengthened health offer and more targeted and supported pathways from our health partners. This investment was considered best value from a cost and social value perspective as it is more accessible and available to a wider range of residents”.

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