

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

**MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2003 AT 2.00 P.M.**

Agenda Item No.

8

**LETCHWORTH – FORMER NORTON SCHOOL SITES.**

Report of the Corporate Director – People and Property

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Executive Members: David Beatty, Robert Gordon

Local Members: Nigel Agar, Keith Emsall and Lorna Kercher

**1.0 Purpose of report**

- 1.1 To establish the property policy for the former Norton School premises in Letchworth.
- 1.2 To consider provision of a second PE space for The Highfield School.

**2.0 Summary**

- 2.1 Following the decision to close Norton School, implementation of projects to expand the three other secondary schools in the area is in hand to provide for the relocation of students. It is planned that the former Norton School premises will cease to be used for secondary education purposes in August 2003.
- 2.2 The school has occupied two sites, as identified on the plan with this report, being the main site with buildings and the site of the detached playing fields. The County Council owns the freehold of the lands marked Area A and Area C. The land marked Area B is leased from Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.
- 2.3 The main site (Areas A and B) has potential for residential development and can be considered for disposal. The detached playing field (Area C) does not have development potential and can be considered for school use and for reserve capacity.
- 2.4 The Highfield School needs a second physical education (PE) space and options for its provision are available.

**3.0 Conclusions**

- 3.1 Subject to the grant of planning permission, the freehold part of the main site (Area A) can be sold for residential development.

- 3.2 Subject to the grant of planning permission for housing development, to consent to disposal from the Department for Education and Skills and to agreement of terms with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, joint sale with the Foundation of Area B for residential development can be arranged.
- 3.3 Areas A and B should be marketed at the same time to establish a comprehensive development scheme and to achieve best value.
- 3.4 The County Council should retain ownership of the detached playing fields (Area C).
- 3.5 Subject to joint sale of Area B with the Foundation being achieved, an allocation from the County Council's share of the proceeds of that sale can be made to fund the construction of a second PE space for The Highfield School.
- 3.6 Approval of the detailed budgets for these proposals and to the timing of commitments can be delegated to the Corporate Director, People and Property in consultation with the Executive Members for Resources and Children Schools and Families.

#### **4.0 Background**

- 4.1 The Hertfordshire School Organisation Committee has agreed closure of Norton School and that has taken effect. The school premises are now being used as temporary accommodation for Knights Templar School pending the completion of building projects.
- 4.2 Norton School occupied two sites that fall into three land parcels as identified on the plan with this report. Parcels A and C are owned freehold, whilst parcel B is leasehold. Parcel A on the main site contains the principal school buildings, whilst parcel B comprises mostly playing field with a gymnasium and a single storey teaching block. Parcel C is a detached playing field.
- 4.3 Cabinet has previously approved 'use of the value of the Norton site to fund the replacement accommodation at Fearnhill, The Highfield and Knights Templar schools'.
- 4.4 At the time of that decision the estimated value of the Council's freehold interest in the main site was £2.7m. This amount was entered into the provisional budget for the replacement teaching accommodation at the other three schools, and has since been confirmed as part of the funding for the Letchworth Schools Project, with an approved project budget of £7.96m.
- 4.5 Also at that time, no account was taken of the potential of the Council's interest (in rear part of the main school site) owing to uncertainties relating to the possible future uses of that land, the relatively short length of unexpired lease and third party interests. The lease commenced in 1932 and now has just 28 years unexpired.

## **5.0 Information**

- 5.1 Extensive investigations regarding the development potential of the main site have been undertaken, including informal consultations with the Local Planning Authority, North Hertfordshire District Council. From these, it is clear that residential development of both Area A and B, either in phases or comprehensively, are likely to be achievable.
- 5.2 There are no proposals from any county service for re-use of Parcel A.
- 5.3 Part of it falls within the protection of school playing fields regime and an application for consent to dispose has been made to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. Whilst his decision is awaited, a positive response is expected. A planning application for the redevelopment of this area for residential purposes is being prepared.
- 5.4 Preparations for the sale of Area A, that underpins funding for the investment in the other secondary schools, are well advanced, with the intention of securing a sale during 2003/2004.
- 5.5 Following the decision of the School Organisation Committee to close the school, discussions have taken place with the freeholder of Area B of the main site, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF). They have indicated that they are willing to dispose of their freehold interest in conjunction with the leasehold interest, and with appropriate sharing of the proceeds of joint sale.
- 5.6 Children Schools and Families Service has bid to retain the majority of Area B – the playing field and the gymnasium block - for use by The Highfield School, which is situated about two miles away. That school lacks a second physical education space and will be deficient in the playing field area required for a school of its size for when the new buildings to accommodate the relocated students are completed. It was not possible to make provision for a second PE space within the budget for the approved scheme for additional accommodation.
- 5.7 The site of the detached playing field (Area C) has little development potential owing to restrictive planning policy guidance and local plan policies. No firm proposals have been made for this land.
- 5.8 However, it is likely to be needed to meet requirements arising from the secondary education reorganisation and from property disposals. If allocated to The Highfield School with sufficient team game playing fields the lack of playing field provision at its main site can be resolved. Use by the local community may address a possible local planning authority requirement to recompense for loss of the playing fields in Area B of the main site, should that be sold for development.

## **6.0 Consideration of Options**

- 6.1 While the lack of a second indoor space for PE is not unusual in Hertfordshire secondary schools, the lack of a second enclosed large space (which most schools have and use for examination purposes) is an issue for The Highfield School. Neither its hall nor dining room is enclosed and therefore suitable for examinations. In addition, the school could suffer by loss of parity with the other two schools being expanded as a consequence of the Norton School closure, both of which have excellent sports halls.
- 6.2 Options for the provision of a second PE space for The Highfield School have been investigated. Information on the costed options is contained in a separate confidential report. CSF Service strongly prefers resolution of the issue through the building of a sports hall on The Highfield School site, rather than retention of Area B of the former Norton School site.
- 6.3 That preference sits well with a proposal for the County Council and the Heritage Foundation to co-operate in the disposal of Areas B for residential development.
- 6.4 The options for Area B are thus:
- 1) Allocate the land to The Highfield School for the foreseeable future and forego any additional capital receipt;
  - 2) Secure funds for an additional PE space scheme at The Highfield School through the Capital Bidding process (or any alternative procurement means) and make Area B available for disposal only when that scheme has been achieved;
  - 3) As 2) above, but make Area B available for disposal at the same time as Area A and provide the PE space at a later date.
  - 4) Make Area B available for sale at the same time as Area A, and secure a lease back from the purchaser to continue use for the Highfield School until a replacement facility had been provided at the Highfield School site.
  - 5) Make Area B available for sale at the same time as Area A, earmark part of the receipts from the sale of Area B for the provision of a second PE space at The Highfield School site.
- 6.5 Preparations for sale of Area B have not started pending resolution of these options. All options involving disposal of Area B for residential development require agreement with the Heritage Foundation, consent from the DfES under the protection of school playing fields regulations and planning permission.

## **7.0 Town Planning**

- 7.1 For planning appraisal purposes, the former Norton School site should be considered in the three parts identified on plan EM 10141.

### Area A – Main Site (HCC owned)

Initial discussions with the local planning authority indicate that this area can be viewed as a “windfall” housing opportunity. The site is prominent and close to two Conservation Areas. Inclusion of the site in the Register of Important Local Buildings in Letchworth indicate that the original 1908 building should be retained as part of a development scheme. Emerging proposals from consultant architects indicate that this building can be retained as part of a compact residential layout. Affordable housing will need to comprise 25% of total units, with a majority of these being ‘social rented’.

### Area B – Main Site (LGCHF owned)

Whilst most of this area is laid out as a playing field, a substantial proportion is covered by tennis courts, pathways and buildings. It is therefore appropriate in part at least for residential development. Subject to access, design, layout and open space considerations, it is possible that a housing development laid out around a retained open area could be achievable. Initial transportation studies indicate that access should be available from Norton Road to serve development on both sites A and B. Investigations are underway to confirm that the playing field can be released without detriment to the overall supply of local open spaces.

### Area C – Detailed Playing Field (HCC owned)

The playing field is surrounded by detached dwellings and adjoins a Conservation Area and several listed buildings. A strip of land from Cashio Lane provides access for pedestrians and grounds maintenance vehicles only. The land is considered to have limited development potential due to its location, limited access opportunities and playing field protection policies. Having said that, in order to introduce sustainable alternative recreational uses, formal access and parking infrastructure together with a small changing pavilion may need to be introduced.

In order to secure the field for use by The Highfield School, it would be sensible to explore the possibility of identifying a partner sports organisation, which could use and manage it on a shared basis. Securing a long term community sports use of the playing field could form an important element of a development package comprising Areas A, B and C.

## **8.0 Self-Financing Aspects**

The criteria for self-financing schemes are that they may be funded from disposal receipts within the asset replacement capital control regime if :-

- The proposed scheme is estimated to be robustly self-financing.
- Change cannot be achieved within the budget guideline.
- There is a real impediment to the beneficial release of resources.
- The cash flow effect can be accommodated within the capital control limits as they affect the whole of the council.

The proposal to provide a second PE space at The Highfield School does not appear in any current programme. Funding is potentially available from release and joint disposal of Area B. The need for the additional space arises from the transfer to the school of pupils from the former Norton School and so the space would replace accommodation now at the Norton site, particularly the gym.

## **9.0 Financial Implications**

- 9.1 The current Letchworth Schools Project is a funded scheme as described in paragraph 4.4 above.
- 9.2 The proposal to provide a second PE space for The Highfield School can be funded out of additional capital receipts arising from a further land sale. No prefunding would be required as the proposal relies on the achievement of joint sale with the Heritage Foundation.
- 9.3 Estimates are provided in a Part II report.