

## Watchetts Tennis Court Redevelopment

### Summary

To redevelop the ageing courts at Watchetts Recreation Ground to create a new mixed-use Tennis and Netball facility on the same site.

### Portfolio – Places & Strategy

Date consulted: 4 May 2020

### Wards Affected – Watchetts

### Recommendation

The Executive is advised to RESOLVE that

- (i) the Tennis Courts at Watchetts Recreation Ground be redeveloped to include the resurfacing of all five courts, repainting, new perimeter fencing, installation of a new gate access and online booking system, and the introduction of floodlights (subject to planning);
- (ii) as part of the redevelopment, three courts be converted to mixed use facilities allowing for the provision of two netball courts;
- (iii) a tender process to source and appoint a suitable contractor be undertaken; and
- (iv) the project delivery be delegated to the Executive Head of Business, in consultation with the Places & Strategy Portfolio Holder.

The Executive is advised to RECOMMEND that the Capital Programme be increased by £135,000 to fund the redevelopment of the Watchetts Tennis Court.

## 1. Resource Implications

- 1.1 Tennis Courts at three Council operated sites including Watchetts have no records of resurfacing since being laid 20+ years ago and are falling into a state of disrepair. If the Council does not take action, the courts will continue to deteriorate, leading to a greater risk of insurance claims and eventually the facilities being taken out of commission entirely.
- 1.2 There is currently no sinking fund (money set aside for refurbishment) in place for the facility. As part of this capital project, it is proposed to set up a sinking fund so the courts become self-sustaining in a similar manner to the 3G pitch at Frimley Lodge Park, minimising the need for future capital investment in the longer-term.
- 1.3 As part of the proposed refurbishment, three tennis courts will be converted to 'mixed use' facilities, allowing for the provision of two

netball courts. At present there are no dedicated netball facilities in Surrey Heath outside of school settings (which are limited) and no local leagues, meaning those who wish to play largely have to travel out of borough. The Council has received criticism for this in the past.

- 1.4 Netball has enjoyed increased interest and growing participation figures in recent years, with 'Active Lives Survey' data showing 319,400 adults now play netball fortnightly.
- 1.5 At present the courts at Watchetts generate minimal income for the council (only £75 from pay and play bookings between Jul 2018 – Jul 2019).
- 1.6 In 2018 the courts at London Road Recreation Ground were chosen as a pilot site for improvements, as out of the Council operated courts they were in the best condition and so required least investment. Work included minor surface improvements, repainting, gate access technology and the introduction of a new booking system. The site at London Road Recreation Ground where improvements have already been implemented generated £1357 in pay and play bookings during the same period Jul 2018 – Jul 2019.
- 1.7 The Council also introduced a £39 annual membership in conjunction with the renovated courts at London Road Recreation Ground, which has yielded a further £2681 in annual memberships. These figures exceeded Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) projections for year 1.
- 1.8 It is anticipated that from tennis use alone, Watchetts should at least match London Road Recreation Ground with the potential for an even larger return if floodlights are introduced.
- 1.9 Runnymede Borough Council has similar floodlit mixed use Tennis/Netball courts in Chertsey and by working with an external netball league generate c.£12k income per year. It is hoped that by securing a similar partner the Watchetts site could achieve this level of income by year 3.
- 1.10 It is estimated the facility will generate £16k a year (£4k from Tennis, £12k from Netball) by year 3 leaving an estimated surplus after expenses and contribution to sinking fund of around £5,675 a year.
- 1.11 This project will involve a complete refurbishment of the tennis courts at Watchetts including resurfacing of all five courts, repainting, new perimeter fencing, installation of a new gate access and online booking system and the introduction of floodlights (subject to planning permission). Floodlighting would also require an upgrade to the current electricity supply at the site.
- 1.12 The cost to deliver the full proposed works including floodlighting is estimated around £135,000, although a number of grant applications

will be submitted in an effort to reduce the level of direct funding by the Council.

- 1.13 The estimated cost without floodlighting and upgraded supply is c.£103,000, although this approach would make a netball league unviable meaning the majority of income would be lost.
- 1.14 As this project is about making capital improvements to open up sport and physical activity opportunities, it is considered under usual circumstances this project would have a viable chance of a grant award but success is not guaranteed.
- 1.15 The anticipated cost is based on indicative quotes and information provided by the Lawn Tennis Association. All information was collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent impact on costs, timescale and the ability to secure grant funding is currently unknown.
- 1.16 The Lawn Tennis Association also offer a fast-track interest free loan for floodlight installation if this is seen as a palatable option.
- 1.17 The indicative payback period (without external grants) will be significant at 22-23 years. However it should be recognised that without investment there is growing risk of insurance claims and even the facility being taken out of action.

## **2. Key Issues**

- 2.1 More than 20million UK adults are classified as physically inactive, increasing their risk of heart disease and costing the UK health service as much as £1.2billion each year according to the British Heart Foundation (2017).
- 2.2 There are growing calls for local authorities to do more towards making physical activity easier and more accessible for all. Although Surrey Heath is statistically more active than much of the country, our participation levels are below a number of our Surrey neighbours (Sport England Active Lives Survey 2019).
- 2.3 The scheme will improve access to quality sporting facilities and help the Council achieve an outcome of a healthier, more active population.
- 2.4 The current charging policy at Watchetts is ineffective due a lack of ability to effectively police it. An online booking system has been introduced at all tennis court sites but without gate access technology to work alongside it and as grounds contractors do not have a fixed presence in each park, the vast majority of people are able to play without being asked to pay. As a consequence, the Council is missing out on potential income and is very limited in the amount of usage data it can collect.
- 2.5 The court improvements will also stop people who have migrated from London Road Recreation Ground (where the gate access system

means they have to pay) over to Watchetts (where there is currently no gate access system) in order to avoid paying. This is considered a localised issue due to the proximity of the two venues; it is not anticipated players would drive to Frimley Green (the next nearest Council courts) in order to try and play for free there.

- 2.6 External tennis coaching providers have previously booked or shown interest in hiring the courts at Watchetts but have complained the current court surface is restrictive to growing an ongoing programme because players have such a poor experience (e.g. lines aren't clear, ball doesn't bounce evenly etc.) and the lack of floodlights means there is limited playing capacity. As a result, the council is losing out on a potential additional income stream.
- 2.7 Subject to planning approval the redevelopment would provide floodlighting which would allow residents and visitors to use the facilities during the evenings – this is particularly important for residents who are unable to access facilities during weekdays. At present with the exception of the 3G pitch at Frimley Lodge, there are no Council operated sporting facilities available after dusk.
- 2.8 Unlike many of our other parks Watchetts remains open after dark most evenings for Camberley Rugby Club and Frimley Tennis Club, so there would be minimal ongoing revenue costs to keep the park open for recreational tennis/netball provision.

### **3. Supporting Information**

- 3.1 Following this redevelopment there be a will greater range of opportunities for residents to get and stay active with a far more attractive playing experience provided. This will lead to greater public engagement with our facilities, increasing Council income and ensuring the Council continues to meets its health and safety responsibilities.
- 3.2 Surrey Heath Netball Club, which caters for residents from the age of 10 to adult, would benefit greatly from the new facility with a number of teams likely to use the courts as a base.
- 3.3 The gate access system and online booking system will give customers the ability to self-serve, making booking both Netball and Tennis courts more accessible for customers with minimal input required from Council staff. Leisure staff will still be available to support residents who may not have access to booking online.
- 3.4 This project links to the need for resurfacing of the Watchetts Recreation Ground access road currently being proposed by the Recreation and Business team.
- 3.5 The anticipated cost is based on indicative quotes and information provided by the Lawn Tennis Association. True costs will be known once the tender process begins.

- 3.6 The provision of Netball courts would mean increased opportunities to deliver programmes in the borough such as 'Back to Netball' and 'Walking Netball', helping to increase the number of women being active. The redeveloped site would also allow for improved tennis programming through coaching partners.
- 3.7 Netball England and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) would both be in support of the development and while neither has substantial dedicated funding to put towards the project, the LTA have suggested they will be likely to cover the cost of installation of the gate access technology (worth around £5k).

#### **4. Options**

- 4.1 The Executive has the option to:
- (i) Agree the proposed refurbishment and redevelopment of Watchetts Tennis Courts, as set out in this report;
  - (ii) Agree the refurbishment and redevelopment of Watchetts Tennis Courts, with any changes considered appropriate; or
  - (iii) Choose not to proceed with the proposed works.
- 4.2 Alternatively, the Executive can agree proposals to refurbish and redevelop Watchetts Tennis Courts but defer any work being carried out until the post Covid-19 situation is more clear. The decision when to proceed can be delegated to the Executive Head of Business in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

#### **5. Corporate Objectives and Key Priorities**

- 5.1 This capital scheme will support the Council to achieve its key corporate objectives as follows:
- 5.1.1. **Place** - *Protect, manage and maintain our parks and open spaces including the provision of quality leisure facilities* – redeveloping the courts will ensure tennis can continue to be accessed safely by residents and allow new opportunities to play netball in the borough (there are currently no facilities outside school settings, and these are limited).
  - 5.1.2. **Prosperity** - *Strengthen the Council's financial independence by increasing our own income* – The project will allow the courts to generate substantially more income in court hire and coaching in comparison to the minimal amount received currently.
  - 5.1.3. **People** - *Use our green space to deliver a programme of sport and leisure activities supporting community engagement with all people* – An improved playing facility will allow a greater range of programmes to be delivered (a coaching provider has already expressed their interest).

This is of particular interest in Netball, where we are currently unable to offer programmes such as Walking Netball without an accessible (and reasonably priced) facility.

- 5.1.4. **Performance** - *Improve access to services through the use of technology* – as part of the redevelopment a new gate access and accompanying booking system will be implemented, allowing customers to quickly and easily self-serve themselves using any smart device over the internet (although bookings can be taken over the phone for customers who do have access). This removes the need for Council staff or contractors to physically collect money.

## **6. Legal Issues**

- 6.1 Planning permission is likely to be required for floodlighting.
- 6.2 There is a precedent set in this regard as the adjacent private courts at Frimley Tennis Club already have floodlighting on two of their courts.

## **7. Governance**

- 7.1 All financial matters will be carried out under strict audit guidelines
- 7.2 The contractor will be appointed following a thorough tender process.

## **8. Risk Management**

- 8.1 The financial risk will be mitigated by increased income generation, albeit the total repayment would be over a significant period.
- 8.2 There is potential reputational risk to the council from those who may not perceive investment into leisure facilities as a priority, particularly given the current climate with Covid-19. This is however balanced by the risk of criticism from not investing in facilities that support residents to improve their physical and mental wellbeing.
- 8.3 It is likely the courts will need to be closed for a number of weeks during the tennis season as work is reliant on good weather, meaning there is a temporary risk of complaints from disappointed users. Alternative courts are available at London Road Recreation Ground less than a mile away.

## **9. Equalities Impact**

- 9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out for the Council's wider 'Tennis in the Park' scheme. A full Equality Impact Assessment will be completed for the site when an exact specification and layout of the works has been supplied by the appointed contractor.

## **10. Community Safety**

- 10.1 It is not anticipated that this work will generate additional community safety issues.

## **11. Consultation**

- 11.1 The Lawn Tennis Association have identified latent demand and have completed extensive research into what would encourage more people to play Tennis in Surrey Heath.
- 11.2 The Council's leisure team also undertook their own public consultation in summer 2018 to understand the local views and motivations of both those who were already using parks tennis courts but also those who don't.
- 11.3 Responses in both cases showed improved court conditions and a clearer, simpler booking system were the main factors that would make people more likely to play at tennis in our parks. These improvements would demonstrate we have listened to public opinion and acted accordingly.

## **12. PR and Marketing**

- 12.1 Being able to demonstrate the Council cares about public leisure facilities and the health and wellbeing of its residents is likely to be positively received.
- 12.2 Officers have received a number of complaints and/or negative feedback about their experience when using the existing courts at Watchetts. This redevelopment would support a change in the public perception of Council facilities from negative to positive.
- 12.3 The Council has received criticism in the past for not having community netball facilities available. This project would address those concerns.

## **13. Officer Comments**

- 13.1 Taking no action is not recommended as a viable option as the courts will continue to deteriorate and in the longer-term will cost substantially more to repair, while the Council will continue to miss out on opportunities in regards to both greater public participation and income.

<b>Annexes</b>	<b>None</b>
<b>Background Papers</b>	<b>N/A</b>
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