

**ST NEOTS LEISURE CENTRE AND
ERNULF COMMUNITY SCHOOL SITE ISSUES
(Joint Report by Head of Community Services and
Head of Planning Services)**

1 SUMMARY

This report informs the Cabinet of developments concerning the St Neots Leisure Centre and Ernulf Community School site on Barford Road, St Neots since it received a report on 23 October 2003 on the development of a Youth and Community Performing Arts Centre proposed for the site.

2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 At its meeting on 23 October 2003, Cabinet resolved that “the bid by Ernulf Community School for Performing Arts College status be supported”. It resolved further that “the Head of Community Services, in conjunction with the Executive Member for Leisure, be authorised to explore further the opportunities that may arise from a shared approach to managing and developing community cultural services at the Ernulf School/St Neots Leisure Centre site”.
- 2.2 Since October, the Executive Councillor for Leisure and the Head of Community Services have attended a series of multi agency meetings with parties interested in the site developments and other developments adjacent to the site. The meetings have been attended by representatives of St Neots Town Council and the Alfred Hall Memorial Trust, as well as the School. During the same period, the Head of Community Services has had a number of separate discussions with the Principal of the School with architects employed by the County Council to determine the viability of physically linking a new Youth and Community Performing Arts Centre with either or both of the existing Leisure Centre buildings.
- 2.3 As a result of these meetings, the aspirations of the organisations involved have been clarified. They are summarised below.

- The District Council has a capital programme which is split between maintaining the existing assets and improving facilities and services. The cost of maintaining the existing structures is likely to escalate. There would be potential to reduce revenue operating costs by operating from a single building rather than a split site. The capital programme for St Neots Leisure Centre has been put on hold whilst the joint discussions referred to above have been taking place. The District Council is embarking upon a programme of income generating activities in its Leisure Centres in order to reduce their real terms revenue costs to the Council.
- Ernulf Community School has been awarded Performing Arts College status. It wishes to develop a Youth and Community Performing Arts Centre on the site. The Centre would comprise a main auditorium designed to be flexible in its use. It will also need storage space, teaching facilities, a relocated nursery and will need services like toilets, changing accommodation and catering facilities. The School sees the Centre as a prestigious facility, meeting its curriculum needs, but also providing a venue for a wide range of other uses, particularly by youth and community groups. Consequently, it believes that the Centre's location needs to front Barford Road, providing a flagship entrance to the site. The School is refurbishing its existing performing arts teaching areas in time for the new school year. The School is reflecting these major changes in a new name from September 2004 – St Neots Community College.
- The Alfred Hall Memorial Trust has the twin objectives of providing a home ground for Eynesbury Rovers Football Club and social and recreational facilities for the residents of Eynesbury. It wishes to sell the existing football ground in Hall Road (marked 'A' on the plan attached as Annex 1) for housing development. This would enable it to purchase the land marked 'C' on Annex 1 and redevelop it for sporting and recreational purposes. It would enable the reprovision of the football club's existing facilities which have become dilapidated and outdated and the provision of a grass training pitch, an all weather training surface, and a new building suitable for use by the community for a wide range of purposes. All of this would enable the football club to improve and extend its junior section, which is currently constrained by the space available.
- St Neots Town Council has long held ambitions to improve the facilities associated with its football pitches on Banks' Field (marked 'B' on Annex 1). Its intention has been to use the Section 106 contribution arising from the housing developments on Barford Road to provide changing rooms for the pitches. Currently, the pitches are only used by Eynesbury Rovers' junior section who use the club's own changing facilities. The Town Council would prefer to co-locate Banks' Field facilities with those of the football club to ensure optimum use and security and to minimise the built footprint.

- The Local Education Authority (LEA) has supported the School's aspirations as outlined above. There is also an early indication that it is prepared to consider land exchanges in order to facilitate the aspirations of the Trust. It may also seek to dispose of land for housing development within the existing guidelines for the sale of school playing fields (marked 'E' on Annex 1). Moreover, the LEA has been awarded £329,000 from the New Opportunities Fund for a Community Tennis Initiative on the site. This is in partnership with the School, the District Council (contributing £30,000 from the Medium Term Plan) and the local tennis club. The intention is to use the award and the District Council's contribution to update the School's tennis courts (part of 'E' on Annex 1) for the benefit of School, Club and community. Ancillary accommodation is to be provided through the use of both the School's and the Leisure Centre's facilities.

2.4 Most of these aspirations are complementary, but as they have developed in their separate guises, it is now apparent that the impact on the site and the surrounding (largely residential) neighbourhood needs to be considered as a whole. Indeed, not to do so will be likely to prejudice the successful implementation of one or all of the projects and miss out on advantages arising from a common approach. The early view from the Council's Planning Services (without prejudice to the determination of any future planning applications) is encapsulated in the e mail attached as Annex 2. As a result, it is **recommended** that Cabinet endorses a master planning process for the site which:

- sets out to meet the aspirations of all the partners identified above;
- optimises the benefits to the site of the partners' capital contributions;
- consolidates ancillary facilities – crèche/nursery, parking, bars & catering, changing, toilets, etc – into appropriate clusters to optimise their use and the revenue accruing from their use;
- makes the most efficient use of the existing revenue contributions of the partners;
- takes account of the needs of people with disabilities and other excluded communities; and
- meets the requirements of the planning process.

2.5 Planning Services now has the capacity to undertake this master planning approach to the site, although it will need to seek inputs from specialists in, for example, highways matters.

- 2.6 Once a master plan is established, the partners can proceed with the key elements of the plan as each of the resources become available. An indicative order of those resources is tabled at Annex 3. The master plan will also enable an assessment to be made of the feasibility of additional external funding. This might arise from, for example, the Football Foundation, the Arts Council, Sport England, the Countryside Agency or individual charitable sources. To carry weight in the planning process, the master plan will, in due course, need to be the subject of consultation prior to its adoption by Cabinet.

3 IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Circumstances have combined to provide a unique opportunity to develop the School/Leisure Centre site and adjacent areas as a significantly improved community cultural facility. The existing site does not work as well as it might as a result of piecemeal development. The implications of a master plan are that all parties to the developments pool their expertise and resources to ensure that the resultant facilities serve the widest range of community need within an agreed envelope of revenue costs and thus that further piecemeal development is avoided. Partners will need to recognise that their individual needs may need to be adjusted to meet the corporate good.
- 3.2 Clearly, the implications for both capital funding and revenue costs are far from clear currently. However, it is logical to suggest that the benefits in term of potential additional income generation through additional use of the site would result in future revenue costs **to the District Council** for the current range of services which are no greater than those planned in the Medium Term Plan.

4 CONCLUSION

The community facilities on and adjacent to the Ernulf School/St Neots Leisure Centre site have developed with little reference to each other. The opportunity to radically alter the site to make the best use of a variety of disparate capital resources together with the existing level of revenue funding is available now. Failure to grasp this opportunity may result in a further piecemeal approach to development which is likely to make less of the resources and exacerbate problems ancillary to the site.

5 RECOMMENDATION

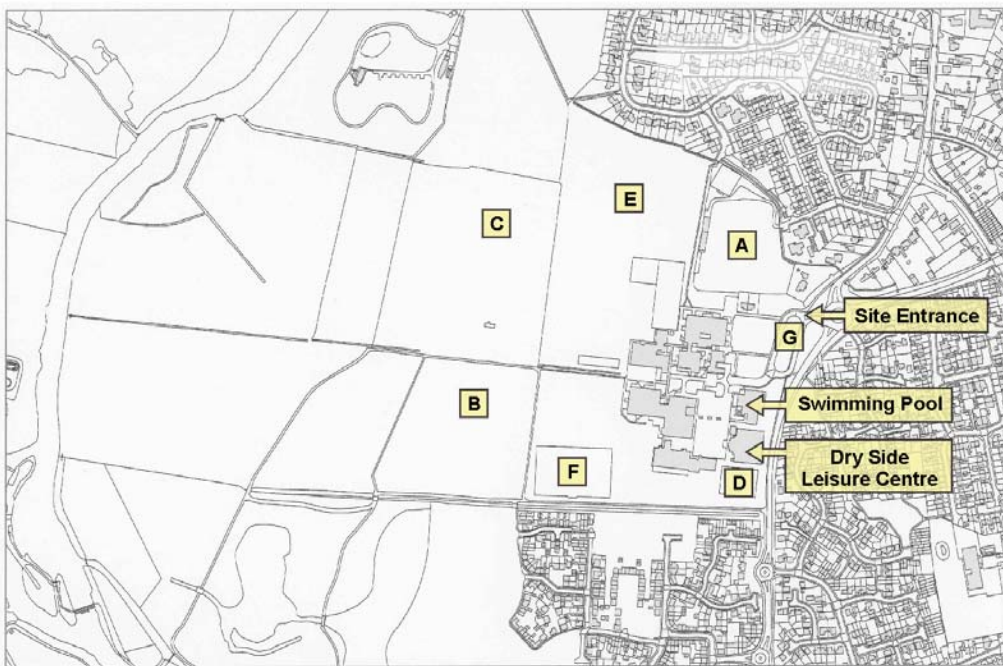
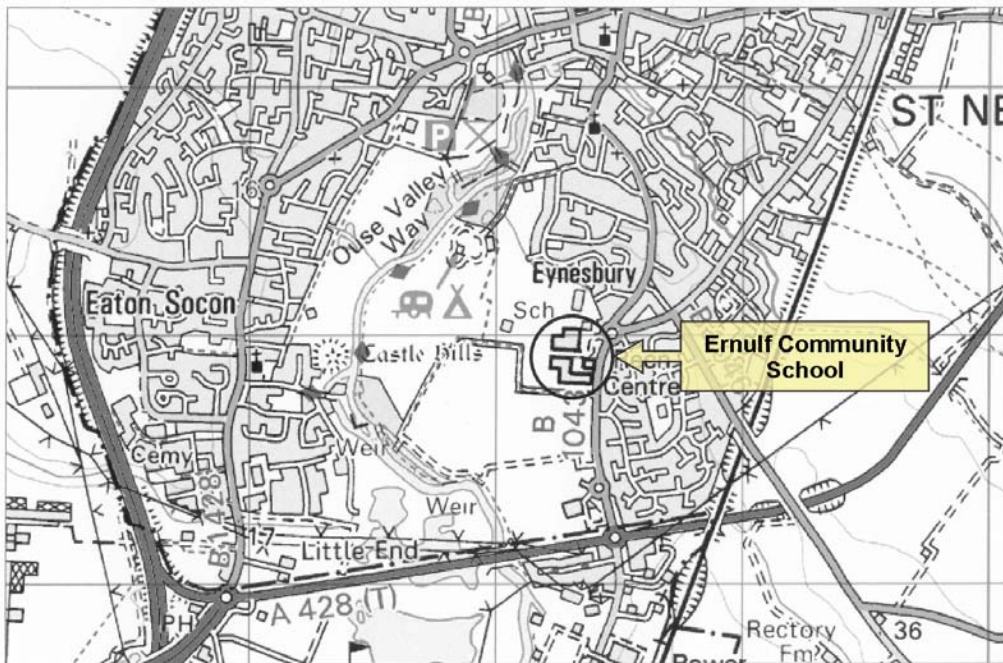
That Cabinet approves the development of a master plan for the Ernulf Community School and St Neots Leisure Centre site and adjacent areas, to be submitted to a future meeting.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Report to Cabinet 23 October 2003.

Contact Officers: Peter Jones, Head of Community Services

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From: Ingram, Steve (Dev Control)
Sent: 12 May 2004 16:17
To: Jones, Peter (Comm. Serv.)
Cc: Sharp, Malcolm (Planning); Probyn, Richard (Planning)
Subject: RE: Developments on and around the Ernulf School/St Neots LC Site

Importance: High

Peter,

Further to our meeting and in the light of the other potential development proposals (i.e. the college's aspirations and your own ideas for rationalising/enhancing HDC's leisure facilities) that are/maybe coming forward it is considered that, in planning terms, it will be necessary to deal with these proposals in a comprehensive manner. Such a procedure would ensure that any development actually seeks to maximise overall community, and delivers other related benefits, and avoids the obvious potential pitfalls of dealing with piece-meal proposals on an ad-hoc basis.

Accordingly it is considered that it will be necessary for all the prospective parties to support a comprehensive master planning exercise for the whole area that;

1. Identifies the overall development aspirations of all the respective parties and accordingly considers the nature and scale of all the proposed new and/or amended uses that are/will be proposed within the area.
2. Fundamentally considers the nature and form of access arrangements that would be required to service those respective uses. The master plan would also have to consider existing road capacities and define a strategy for rationalising access to the overall site whilst at the same time minimising environmental and residential impacts.
3. Make proper provision for the joint-use of facilities/infrastructure e.g. joint use car parking provision/shared reception facilities/maximised community space in order to minimise the wasteful duplication of facilities.
4. Properly considers the nature of the re-development opportunities that may be available in order to maximise the brown field development opportunities available.
5. Takes due account of the flood plain and landscape character considerations.

I hope this is helpful.

Steve

**EXISTING KNOWN RESOURCES AVAILABLE ON THE ERNULF
COMMUNITY SCHOOL AND ST NEOTS LEISURE CENTRE SITE AND
ADJACENT AREAS**

Agency	Capital £k	Revenue £k	
Ernulf Community School	1,000	Limited to technical and administrative support	
Huntingdonshire District Council	650	520	
St Neots Town Council	190	Less than 1	
Cambridgeshire County Council	359 (including HDC contribution)	40 (bid in place only, over two years to fund community development)	