

**ST NEOTS LEISURE CENTRE AND
ST NEOTS COMMUNITY COLLEGE SITE ISSUES
(Report by Head of Community Services)**

1 SUMMARY

This report, together with a separate report by the Head of Planning Services, updates Members on progress made since it last received a report on this matter in June.

2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 At its meeting on 24 June 2004, Cabinet received a report which summarised the outcomes of meetings between parties interested in the proposed development of a Youth and Community Performing Arts Centre at the St Neots Leisure Centre and St Neots Community College (formerly Ernulf Community School) site in Barford Road, St Neots. The Cabinet resolved that the proposed development and preparations of a master plan for the site and adjacent areas, together with a business plan, be submitted to a future meeting.
- 2.2 Since 24 June, officers from both Planning Services and Community Services have liaised separately and jointly with the other partners to the proposed development. These are the County Council, St Neots Town Council, the College and the Alfred Hall Memorial Trust. As a result, all the partners were able to agree to developments which focused a range of cultural services to benefit the town and its catchment area onto the site. The partners recognise that this will require a significant degree of co-operation and compromise, but will enable development to proceed in a co-ordinated and efficient manner, making the optimum use of the resources available. This agreement is embodied strategically in the draft urban design framework which forms part of the Head of Planning Services' report and meets the first part of the requirements of the Cabinet.
- 2.3 The second part of the Cabinet's requirement, that is the preparation of a business plan for that part of the development which the District Council will manage, depends upon the resolution of a number of issues. These include:
- the feasibility of linking a new Performing Arts Centre with a Leisure Centre through either:
 - o an entirely new building;
 - o a new building incorporating the existing swimming pool tank;
 - o a new Performing Arts Centre linked to at least some of the existing Leisure centre facilities;
 - the provision of shared ancillary facilities in any new building – including, in particular, reception facilities, a crèche/nursery, bars and catering facilities and changing accommodation – and their management;

- the management options for outdoor sport – the floodlit areas and grass pitches, including school playing fields; and
- the impact of new services delivered through the Leisure Centre, including fitness studios and bars and catering services.

2.4 All of the above are feasible within the constraints of the urban design framework, but without a proper detailed feasibility study their impact, not least financially, is not possible currently to predict. For that reason, it is proposed that the District Council should work with, as a minimum, the County Council and the College to undertake a detailed feasibility study to determine the optimum approach required to meet their particular on site aspirations. The feasibility study could be extended to include the Trust's and the Town Council's aspirations.

3 FEASIBILITY STUDY APPROACH

3.1 The College's aspirations for a flagship building to reflect its new identity as a Specialist College in the Performing Arts and Communication Technologies have led to the suggestion for an architectural competition to be held to design and manage the construction of a new building. Consequently, it is proposed that the feasibility study would report on both the capital and revenue implications of the options identified in 2.3 above; investigate the opportunities for external funding of those options; investigate the funding available from the partners, including any desire to "ring fence" resources delivered through land sales or exchanges; and thus develop a design brief for the options which are feasible within the likely funding identified.

3.2 The costs of this exercise would be borne by the partners in the study, the District Council's contribution being funded from existing resources. However, if the feasibility study leads to an architectural competition it is possible that funding for the study may be obtained from either the Arts Council, Sport England or the Department for Education & Skills.

4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As reported in June, as an underlying principle in this development, it is assumed that the District Council will not increase its revenue budget for the site. In other words, any increases in revenue costs (including lost interest because capital reserves have been used) must be at least offset by increases in income. Consequently, the revised Medium Term Plan bid for capital resources for St Neots Leisure Centre in the sum of £2.5 million over a two year period shows increased income which meets the ongoing costs and repays the interest lost during the construction phase over a three year period resulting in no additional revenue budget increase for Leisure Centres. Clearly, the District Council's participation in a new build project will be dependent upon the feasibility study demonstrating that this approach is achievable.

5 CONCLUSION

The Council's Planning Services division has progressed the development of an urban design framework for the St Neots Leisure Centre/St Neots Community College site and its surrounding area. The framework will enable the aspirations for the site of a range of partners to be met. The College will be providing a new Youth and Community Performing Arts Centre on the site. This generates an opportunity for the District Council to significantly improve the leisure provision in St Neots.

6 RECOMMENDATION

That Cabinet authorises officers to engage in a partnership with the County Council and the St Neots Community College and other partners as appropriate to procure a feasibility study for the range of site options identified in paragraph 2.3 of this report.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Reports to Cabinet 23 October 2003 and 24 June 2004
St Neots Community College Urban Design Framework (Draft) November 2004

Contact Officer: Peter Jones
Head of Community Services
☎ 01480 388202