

FORMER KEELE GOLF COURSE

Submitted by: Executive Director, Regeneration & Development

Portfolio: Planning and Assets and; Leisure, Culture and Localism.

Ward(s) affected: Keele and; Silverdale and Parkside.

Purpose of the report

- a) To provide members with information about the outcome of a marketing exercise which sought to identify a range of potential options for the interim use of the former Keele Golf Course for a period of up to three years and to seek a decision from members about their preferred option for implementation.
- b) To seek Member's approval to proposed actions relating to the previously agreed master-planning process.

Recommendation

- a) That officers be authorised, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder(s), to undertake a community consultation exercise for a period of 6 weeks to establish the potential scope for some form of community recreation use of the site in whole or in part on the basis described in the report and that the outcome reported back to the earliest available Cabinet meeting.
- b) That in parallel with recommendation (a), officers be authorised to procure the most economically advantageous arrangement for short term grounds maintenance in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder.
- c) That officers be authorised to agree, in principle, the terms and scope of a brief with relevant land owners to commission a master-planning exercise in consultation with the relevant portfolio holder, and reported back to Cabinet for approval.
- d) That the financial resources required as the Council's contribution to the master-planning exercise be sought in accordance with current Financial Regulations.

Reasons for the recommendations

To return the property into reuse, thereby alleviating holding and other costs for a period of three years whilst a comprehensive master planning exercise is undertaken and concluded.

1. Background

- 1.1 At your meeting in January 2014 Cabinet members resolved that the Keele Golf Centre should be closed for the foreseeable future and that officers should report back to the earliest available meeting with advice and information about the medium to long term options for the site.
- 1.2 On 5th March 2014 Cabinet received a further report and made of the following resolutions:-
- a) That officers be authorised to engage with nearby/adjacent land owners with a view to jointly commissioning a comprehensive master-planning exercise, involving Borough Council owned land in the area in order to establish the most appropriate long term use for the Keele Golf Course site.*
- b) That officers report back on the outcome of the land owner engagement process and to seek approval for a two stage master planning exercise beginning with a scoping report to identify its physical parameters, with any budgetary approval being sought from Council as necessary.*
- c) That officers be authorised to undertake a limited maintenance regime on the basis described in the report until the outcome of the master planning exercise is known.*
- d) That officers be authorised to undertake security measures described in the report.*
- e) That officers be authorised to see expressions of interest in some form(s) of interim use for a period of up to three years.*
- f) That officers keep under review the holding costs attributed to the Keele Golf Course and take all appropriate steps to minimise the same.*
- g) That a wider, broader leisure use be kept in mind.*

2. Issues

- 2.1 With regard to resolutions (a) and (b) officers can confirm that discussions have been held with a number of local land owners and it is anticipated that the scope of a master-planning exercise will be reported to your next meeting.
- 2.2 In relation to resolution (c) your officers consider that the most cost-efficient way of undertaking the “limited maintenance regime” would be to allow the grass to be cut for silage / haylage purposes under a simple licence agreement with a third party. Additionally officers undertake regular site inspections to monitor the condition of mature trees, carrying out any urgent health and safety related works as required.
- 2.3 Moving on to resolution (d) the necessary security measures have been undertaken most notably with the building being secured and with public

information signs being placed at key locations around the site confirming the current position regarding closure of the golf course and directing the public to using the public rights of way.

- 2.4 With regard to resolution (e) officers can confirm that “To-let” details were produced and the property advertised both on the internet, press and by way of an on-site display board. Those parties who had previously expressed an interest during last year’s golf centre operator procurement process and others asking for information were provided with the letting details. All were requested to submit written expressions of interest.
- 2.5 Officers can confirm that five expressions of interest were submitted in response to the above-mentioned marketing exercise. For reasons of commercial sensitivity a summary of this information is provided in a confidential appendix to this report.
- 2.6 The marketing particulars specified that the council was seeking to let the former golf centre either for re-use or an alternative leisure use (subject to planning permission) for a maximum period of 3 years on a full repairing & insuring basis and invited rental offers.
- 2.7 None of the expressions of interest met this specification and only two parties came remotely close to doing so and both of these require a longer term and rent free period to make their necessary levels of investment viable.
- 2.8 From discussions between your officers and some of the parties it was evident that the market view of delivering leisure activities at this location is not commercially attractive or viable without some form of subsidy or enabling development. All interested parties are mindful of the possible outcome of the forthcoming master planning exercise which, potentially, could create opportunities for a different overall form of use/development. In that regard the marketing process has at least provided an indication as to how the market might respond to a different brief and this will be useful in informing the master planning exercise.
- 2.9 With regard to resolution (f) the approach described in paragraph 2.2 is the most practical reflection of the actions taken to date.
- 2.10 Finally, in respect of resolution (g) and taking account of the outcome of the recent marketing exercise, members may consider that there is merit in exploring the scope for securing some form of locally-based community recreation uses in the interim period.

3. Options

Interim/short term use

- 3.1 Do minimum – this option would mean a continuation of the basic maintenance regime to ensure that the Council discharges its statutory duties in relation to land ownership.
- 3.2 Re-open the golf course – this option would require the Council to make significant provision for both capital investment and ongoing revenue funding. In the absence of strategic need for the facility you have chosen not to make such financial provision.
- 3.3 Explore other interim use options – whilst the recent marketing process failed to bring forward any implementable proposals (in accordance with the brief) discussions with members suggests that there may be the potential to elicit local interest in some form(s) of community recreation use (subject to cost and risk issues being addressed satisfactorily). Any such approach would need to be supported, in the immediate short term by the previously approved basic grounds maintenance regime.

Master-planning

- 4.4 Having agreed to proceed with commissioning a master-plan for the former golf course in the context of the wider area Members have the option to proceed or to take a different course of action base upon information gleaned from the recent marketing exercise.

5. Preferred Options

Interim use

- 5.1 In order to balance the need for basic grounds maintenance work (in accordance with a previous Cabinet decision) with the desire to mitigate the Council's immediate / short term holding costs (and to minimise service delivery impact) it is now intended to procure a third party to cut the grass under a licence arrangement. In parallel with the latter it is considered that some form of community engagement exercise could be undertaken with a view to offering the site in whole or in part to local community groups for informal recreation or similar purposes. Any such use would be expected to incur no net additional costs or liabilities to the Council.

Master-planning

- 5.2 It is still proposed to proceed with the commissioning of a master-plan on the basis previously agreed in order to establish the most appropriate end use for the site taking into account the current Local Plan process as well as service and financial considerations. At this stage it is intended that officers prepare a brief in liaison with the relevant land owners, and the relevant portfolio holder, and that this be reported, along with the geographical scope of the masterplan and an indicative cost, to a future meeting.

6. Outcomes Linked to Corporate Priorities

- 6.1 At this stage it is unclear how the future of the site might contribute towards the Council Plan priorities. Nevertheless they should be taken into account as part of the master-planning process
- 6.2 On a broader note Members will be aware that there is no provision for either a revenue subsidy or capital investment into future municipal golf provision in this location, in either the MTFs or Capital Programme. Additionally Members are reminded that the approved Asset Management Strategy and Capital Strategy identify the need for disposing of land/property which is no longer required to meet an operational or other need in order to:
- reduce maintenance costs;
 - facilitate development needs and;
 - generate capital Programme demands

7. Sustainability implications

- 7.1 There are no such implications directly arising from this report.

8. Legal and statutory implications

- 8.1 The Council is not under any statutory duty as regards the provision of municipal golf.
- 8.2 The Council has a duty to achieve “best consideration” in the disposal of any land/property assets.
- 8.3 The Local Government Act 2000 (as amended) confers general powers to well-being to Councils thereby enabling them to undertake activities for the social, economic or environmental well-being of their communities.
- 8.4 The Council has a duty of care to protect the interests of users of the land from a health and safety perspective.

9. Equality Impact Assessment

- 9.1 There are no such considerations arising directly from the matters addressed in this report.

10. Financial and resource implications

- 10.1 With the golf course reverting to the Council, whilst short-term management and maintenance costs have been negated by the decision to close the course for the foreseeable future, there will be ongoing holding and maintenance costs. In this regard provision has been made (as part of the 2014/15 budget-setting process) in the sum of £61,280 to enable such costs to be met until a decision is made with regards to the former course's future use. It is worth noting that the main revenue burden relates to National Non-Domestic Rates which costs about £22k p.a.

- 10.2 Security of the buildings to minimise the risk of vandalism, measures to reduce the risk of trespass onto the site has cost £10K (met from the Repairs and Renewal Fund).
- 10.3 At the time of your meeting in March it had been intended that a minimal interim course maintenance involving cutting the grass on the course during the growing season would be assimilated into the work programme of the Council's Grounds Maintenance team, along with inspections to monitor the condition of the trees on the course. In order to minimise service delivery impact it is now intended to procure a third party to cut the grass under a licence arrangement. The option of securing some form of interim community use (on a nil subsidy from or liability to the Council basis) may help to minimise the service impact on the Grounds Maintenance team.
- 10.4 As indicated in the last report to Cabinet any master-planning exercise is likely to require a contribution from this Council of at least £100k for which no provision has been made within any approved budget. At this stage members are being asked to approve the preparation of a brief (using existing officer resources) in liaison with other land owners after which the financial requirements of the parties will be clearer. At that point it would be necessary for officers to seek any financial approval in accordance with the Council's current Financial Regulations (likely to require a decision by the Council).

11. Major risks

- 11.1 The most significant risk arises from the Council's short/medium term inability to make firm decisions about achieving a development-led solution to the site given the Green Belt status of the land.

12. Previous decisions/reports

- 12.1 Reports to Cabinet on 22.5.2013, 16.10.2013, 15.1.2014 and 05.03.2014 along with various reports being considered at Overview and Scrutiny Committees in relation to Economic Development and Enterprise; Transformation and Resources and; Active and Cohesive Communities.

13. Appendices

- 13.1 Appendix A – Confidential summary of the expressions of interest received

14. Background papers

- 14.1 Marketing particulars