



Report of the Director of City Development

Executive Board

Date: 12 March 2008

Subject: Deputation to Council – 16 January 2008 - regarding a request for the Council to buy the recreational and sports facilities on The Leeds Girls High School site.

Electoral Wards Affected:

Headingley
Hyde Park & Woodhouse

Ward Members consulted

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Eligible for Call In

Not Eligible for Call In

(Details contained in the report)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report follows the deputation to Council on 16 January 2008 by a group of residents from the Hyde Park area. The deputation argued that there was a shortage of playing fields and sports facilities in this part of inner Leeds and that, following the relocation of the Leeds Girl's High School to the Alwoodley site in September 2008, the opportunity should be taken for the Council to acquire these facilities for the benefit of the local community.

The issues raised by the deputation are not new. They were explored during discussions with the school and their advisers when the draft planning brief for the site was in preparation. The conclusion reached at that stage was that it was not financially viable for the Council to acquire the facilities. However, as the matter has been raised again at Full Council, it is considered that the prospect of the Council acquiring the playing fields and the sports facilities should be re-visited to determine whether a realistic and affordable way could be found to bring any or all of the facilities into public ownership.

To investigate such a possibility will take some time and it has not been possible to provide a full response for this meeting of the Executive Board. This is therefore a 'holding' response to allow sufficient time to thoroughly investigate the matters raised and to provide a full response at a future meeting of the Exec Board.

1.0 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to highlight the issues raised in the deputation to the Council and to provide background information relating to the merger of Leeds Girls High School with Leeds Grammar School and factual information on the playing fields and sports facilities in question. It is an interim report and a full response to the issues raised in the deputation will be presented to a future meeting of the Executive Board.

2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 In January 2004, the Governors of Leeds Girls High School (LGHS) and Leeds Grammar School (LGS) announced that the two schools were to merge to form the Grammar School at Leeds (GSL). The merger will result in the relocation of all pupils 7 years and above and staff at LGHS to the current LGS site at Alwoodley Gates, Leeds.
- 2.2 As a consequence of the expansion of the Alwoodley Gates site, the current LGHS sites located on Victoria Rd./Headingley Lane will become surplus to requirements. The school will vacate the sites in July 2008; thereafter the land will be unoccupied, with the exception of Ford House which is being retained to provide accommodation for pre-school children, under 7 years of age.
- 2.3 The school occupies four sites, comprising the main school bordered by Headingley Lane and Victoria Road; Ford House and its gardens/sports pitch on the northern side of Victoria Road; the swimming pool and gym and hockey field on the south side of Victoria Road; and the Elinor Lupton Centre on Headingley Lane/Richmond Road. With the exception of the Victoria Road site, all lie within the Headingley Conservation Area. The three sites (excluding the Elinor Lupton Centre) have protected playing pitches.
- 2.4 Council planning officers have been involved in discussions about the future of the School's Headingley site since 2006. The intention was to work towards agreeing a Planning Brief with the School, their advisors and the local community in order to guide the future re-use of the overall campus. The aim of the Brief was to help bring about a comprehensive approach to the re-use and redevelopment of the whole school campus (excluding the Elinor Lupton Centre) on the basis for considering future planning applications. A key objective was to ensure that the site delivers a high quality scheme which respects its landscape setting and Conservation Area context and delivers lasting benefits to the local community. The brief was particularly intended to prevent the individual parts of the campus from being considered in isolation of each other and to balance potential community benefits with development options across the whole school site.
- 2.5 However, the draft Planning Brief was withdrawn at the Council's Executive Board on 22 August 2007 and further discussions with the Girl's School on the disposal and re-use of the Headingley site are yet to be resumed.
- 2.6 The main reasons why the Planning Brief was withdrawn related to a proposal to allow development on part of the school playing fields, in particular the field to the rear of the sports hall off Victoria Road and, to a lesser extent, the tennis courts on the main campus.
- 2.7 A plan is attached to this report which shows the different parts of the school campus and the playing fields which were the subject of the deputation to Council.

3. PLANNING ISSUES

- 3.1 All the playing fields and the sports hall/swimming pool are effectively in private ownership and have never, officially, been available for the public to use. It is well known that there has been informal and unauthorised use of some of the playing field area at Victoria Road in particular. An ongoing objective is to bring at least some of the school facilities into public use and ownership as part of the school's relocation plans.

The Sports Hall and Swimming pool

- 3.2 This facility was built in the 1980's and comprises of a large, multi-purpose sports hall, gymnasium, swimming pool and changing rooms. Following the announcement that the school was going to close, it was recognised that availability of the pool/gym presented an almost unique opportunity to provide such an important facility for the benefit of the local community. Officers are therefore investigating this possibility in discussions with the school and visited the premises on several occasions to examine its condition and potential.
- 3.3 The prospect of this facility being passed to the Council at either no or minimal capital cost is appealing but careful consideration would need to be given to both any consequential additional capital costs and on-going revenue implications to support a new leisure facility in this location.
- 3.4 An alternative to the City Council taking responsibility for this facility would be to try to identify a 3rd party to do so on the basis that there would have to be affordable and convenient access (i.e. opening times) to the range of activities available for the local community. A 'Community Access Agreement' could be drawn up to formalise such an arrangement.

Playing Fields

- 3.5 The future of the playing fields was the most contentious issue when the draft brief was subject to public consultation in Spring 2007 and the need to protect greenspaces on the campus was highlighted in an earlier deputation to Council on 18 July 2007.
- 3.6 The areas defined as Protected Playing Fields on the Leeds Unitary Development Plan (Policy N6) have been used by the school as follows:

Main site: Two sets of tennis Courts (one set still in use and the other used for staff car parking), and an open grassed area used as informal recreation space by the School.

Land south of Ford House: Used for summer athletics events, but only infrequently

Land south of the Gym and Pool, off Victoria Road: Used as a practice pitch and occasional hockey pitch.

- 3.7 In looking at the redevelopment potential of the school, the former Planning Brief (now withdrawn) proposed the following on each of the above sites:

Main site: Removal of the tennis courts and allow the redevelopment of the site for family housing subject to the retention of a large central area of informal greenspace and the protection of important trees.

Land south of Ford House: This is regarded as an important piece of open space and development proposals on this land were firmly resisted. In the draft Planning Brief, the Ford House playing field was proposed to be given by the school to the City Council, together with a capital sum to improve its quality and a further sum of money to maintain it thereafter, in order to create a new community park.

Land south of the Gym and Pool, off Victoria Road: This site was proposed for residential development and was the subject of a large number of objections to the Brief from the local community. The proposal emerged from a careful consideration of the balance of development and community benefits over the whole school site.

- 3.8 The proposals for the playing fields and sports facilities contained in the draft brief (since withdrawn) were contingent upon the school being able to demonstrate compliance with the guidance contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG17) and satisfying Sport

England that, in the round, they would be providing replacement sports facilities of at least equal value. This assessment would include the additional facilities the school are providing at the Alwoodley site, together with the retained and improved (in terms of public access) greenspace and sports facilities in Headingley.

- 3.9 However, the strength of feeling in the local community about these draft proposals, which led to the planning brief being withdrawn, together with the same issues subsequently being raised in the deputation to Council, necessitates a thorough re-consideration of the future of the playing fields and sports facilities at the Leeds Girls High School site.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Executive Board is recommended to note the interim response to the deputation to Council and request that a further report be brought back to Executive Board which examines the feasibility of bringing some or all of the playing pitches and sports facilities into public ownership.