

REPORT TO: Executive Board Sub Committee
DATE: 9 August 2011
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Communities
SUBJECT: Refurbishment of Stadium Pitch
WARDS: All

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To present to Executive Board Sub Committee, an outline proposal to alter the Stadium Pitch to an “all weather third Generation (3G) artificial pitch”.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

2.1 **That Executive Board Sub Committee agree in principle the proposal that the Stadium Pitch be converted to a 3G pitch.**

2.2 **That Members agree that delegated authority be granted to the Strategic Director, Communities in conjunction with the Council Leader, Portfolio Holder, Chief Finance Officer and Chief Legal Officer to conclude all legal and financial arrangements to put into effect the recommendations contained in this report.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Stadium Pitch is presently a traditional sand based grass pitch, although the pitch is in very good condition it is fairly expensive to maintain, a team of two grounds staff, specialist support, plant and machinery is all required to keep it in the present condition (£55k per year).

3.2 Careful monitoring of pitch usage has been critical over the years to ensure it does not get overused and damaged, to replace the centre circle area recently cost over £3,500.

3.3 Due to the nature of the pitch many requests to play amateur or representative games or indeed “team building events” are refused, this obviously leads to both a loss of potential income and can cause ill feeling by the requesting organisations.

3.4 Widnes Vikings have been successful in their application for a Super League Licence for a minimum of a three year period commencing February 2012.

- 3.5 There will clearly be a necessity for the Vikings to have increased training sessions in order for them to fully compete in the Super League next year, although plans are at an advanced stage concerning other training venues within the Borough the Stadium remains a 1st choice venue for training.
- 3.6 Third Generation or 3G pitches as they are known, represent a new development in synthetic turf. The pitch itself looks like natural grass with similar playing characteristics, non-abrasive and can be used with rubber studs.
- 3.7 The open structure gives a firmer grip and provides for better ball control. Pushing off, running, stopping or tackling are all possible without additional risk of injury.
- 3.8 This is thanks to the mix of quartz sand and rubber granules layered into the pitch, which provide effective protection and added shock absorption.
- 3.9 The durability of the surface means that matches can be played concurrently one after the other and could provide a solution to all those matches that are postponed during wet weather.
- 3.10 It is not just wet weather the pitch is beneficial for, in summer grass pitches harden which increases the risk of injury whilst a 3G pitch retains its impact absorbency.
- 3.11 These pitches are the latest revolution in providing 'all weather' playing facilities with an artificial playing surface that feels like grass, looks like grass and plays like grass.
- 3.12 It provides a more natural bounce than sand-filled AstroTurf pitches and provides players with a better grip, resulting in a safer and more enjoyable playing experience.
- 3.13 The introduction of a 3G pitch would help facilitate the need for additional training sessions without fear of pitch damage.
- 3.14 The maintenance of a 3G pitch is considerably less than those for a traditional sand based grass pitch, it is anticipated that only 5 hours is needed each week to maintain it in good order.
- 3.15 The Rugby Football League (The RFL) have agreed in principle to a request by the Vikings to convert the present pitch to a 3G pitch, the RFL see this request as innovative and forward thinking.
- 3.16 The RFL have clear guidelines on pitch specifications.
- 3.17 Although at this stage no other Rugby League clubs play on such a service it is to be used in Rugby Union, clearly having such an

innovative initiative will only heighten the profile of both Widnes Vikings and the Council, the RFL are keen to see the profile of game raised and the recent Super League announcement outlined how they feel the game has progressed, both on and off the field, in recent years.

- 3.18 To be the first club to introduce a 3G pitch will certainly show the RFL and prospective players that Widnes Vikings are forward thinking and are taking their chance in Super League seriously, they will be looking to compete not just take part in Super League 2012.
- 3.19 The RFL have also confirmed that should the pitch be converted to a 3G pitch they would fully endorse any amateur games here and that a 3G pitch would be no barrier to the Stadium playing host to a Challenge Cup semi-final or other such play off finals, should it be chosen during the normal selection process.
- 3.20 Additional revenue will be generated by increased usage of the 3G pitch not just by the Vikings training (who will be charged for the use of the pitch) but from a range of community, amateur, representative and team building events, a full business plan with financial projections is being prepared, however, initial findings suggest that the Stadium could benefit by around £20K in year 1 increasing to over £80K once the initial capital is paid back (probably around 5 to 7 years).
- 3.21 The Borough has a number of first generation (1G) artificial pitches which are at a much lesser quality and standard to the one proposed, these pitches are operated by schools and as such have restricted times available for use, the introduction of a 3G pitch at the Stadium could be seen as direct competition for these and other venues locally.
- 3.22 Even with the restricted usage one generates over £30k per year and the other over £60k per year.
- 3.23 To fully maximise the revenue streams it is proposed that an incentivised arrangement be set up, the current thinking is that this arrangement will have representation from the Stadium Management Team, a representative from the Widnes Vikings Administration Team and a new incentivised sales/marketing manager, who will report directly to the Stadium Manager.
- 3.24 It is proposed that the position of sales/marketing manager be a salary plus commission based post, this will incentivise the post holder to seek new business and actively look to promote the evening football and rugby leagues and team building days.
- 3.25 Additionally community use of the pitch can also be considered, in previous years the condition/wear and tear have had to be seriously

considered when making decisions for community use, with an active marketing campaign coupled with additional community availability the enhanced facilities will be more readily available for community user groups.

3.26 Once bookings have been secured they will be passed to Stadium Fitness where access to the pitch will be allowed and monitored.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 As 3G pitches are of a consistent make up the risk of injury is considerably reduced, during very cold or hot weather traditional pitches can become extremely hard underfoot a 3G pitch retains its “give” and therefore represents a safer surface to train and play on.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The initial Capital Outlay of £500K is to be funded via Steve O’Connor and/or sponsorship of the new pitch, this investment will be repaid (at less than market rate) over an agreed period from the additional revenue generated from the new venture.

5.2 The pitch will meet FA and UEFA standards and confirmation is awaited from Everton Reserves and Everton Ladies that they will continue to play their games on the new 3G pitch.

5.3 The potential net loss of income to the Stadium would be £22,000 per annum, this figure would be more than offset by the saving in the deletion of one member of the grounds staff, the cessation of the specialist turf support and cancelling of all plant contracts £33,000, however, the one-off redundancy costs would mean that in year 1 the net result would be a loss of £10K.

5.4 In subsequent years the net result would be a £11K saving on existing budgets.

5.5 Initial forecasts suggest an additional income stream in the region of £20K for the Stadium in year 1 is not unrealistic.

5.6 An added bonus for the Stadium will be from the secondary spending of the new users.

5.7 Once the initial capital outlay is paid back (£500K) which could take 5 to 7 years, the income share for the Stadium could increase by as much as £80K - £100K per year.

5.8 Additional revenue could be generated from sourcing a pitch Sponsor.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

None identified.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

None identified.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

Increased availability of a 3G pitch will help support the Council in encouraging increased activity in sport and help to meet one of the Council's key priorities in respect of healthier life styles.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

None identified.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 A number of risks have been assessed linked to this proposal, the main risk being the requirement in the future to either convert back to a grass pitch or indeed the need to replace the carpet for the 3G pitch (the new 3G pitch will be guaranteed for 10 years).

7.2 The approximate cost for either of these options is £140K.

7.3 It is proposed that a sinking fund be established from day 1 and that £7,5K per annum be paid in to it from both the Council and the Widnes Vikings, and that this sinking fund is held in the Council's accounts.

7.4 Additionally if Everton and/or Everton Ladies decided not to continue playing here the profile of the Stadium and therefore Council could be reduced in the Football world.

7.5 The pitch would be a 3G pitch, it would therefore conform to the very latest industry standards, these pitches have evolved over the years and although technology is always looking to improve it is likely to be sometime before further improvements are made to the present pitches.

8.0 **EQUALITY & DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 It is proposed that a number of sessions each week will be reserved for disadvantaged groups or groups that are gender specific.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None.

10.0 **JUSTIFICATION FOR TAKING THE ITEM IN PART II**

10.1 **Which Paragraphs apply?**

Paragraph 5.1

10.2 **Public Interest Test**

The public interest in not disclosing is because this report contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the authority hold that information).

10.3 **Conclusion**

The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.