

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 10 December 2020

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director Enterprise, Communities and Resources

**PORTFOLIO:** Community and Sport; Physical Environment

**SUBJECT:** Lease of Recreation Club building and King George V playing fields, Dundalk Road, Widnes

**WARDS:** Kingsway

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 The Purpose of this report is to seek approval to the granting of a lease to Widnes FC Ltd for the Recreation Club building on Dundalk Road and King George V playing fields. The Plan attached shows the extent of the area concerned.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:-**

- 1) The Council enter into a lease agreement with Widnes FC Ltd.**
- 2) The Council bring forward the site for sporting development, subject to planning permission.**
- 3) the Board delegates responsibility for oversight of the development and Lease to the Operational Director Economy Enterprise and Property and the Operational Director Communities and Environment in consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Physical Environment and Community and Sport.**

## **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

The Council holds the Freehold title to the Recreation Club on Dundalk Road, Widnes WA8 8DB, this building having also been known as Corpy Club and Halton Recreation Club.

In July 2018 the building lease was surrendered and the property returned to the Council, the building having being leased since 1990. The licensed bar and associated rooms were closed to the public. The building also provides changing facilities, managed by the Council for teams hiring the grass pitches. The changing rooms have remained in use, but are currently closed due to COVID19 restrictions.

The Council sought Expressions of Interest (EOIs) from interested parties for the lease of the Recreation Club building and King George V playing fields, Dundalk Road, the use of this site to be retained for social, sports and recreational use.

Those organisations who submitted an EOI were invited to an Open Day at the site. Following the site visit only one organisation Widnes FC Limited expressed an interest to continue with discussions.

Widnes FC Ltd presented a proposal to the Council. This proposal, in draft, will require significant investment and resources to deliver. The proposal includes enclosing part of the field around an adult grass pitch.

Detailed building drawings have not been received, but as there were significant change to the appearance of the playing fields, the Council required the consent of the National Playing Fields Association (Fields in Trust) to the plans and the Lease.

The Council is in a position to agree Heads of Terms, subject to Widnes FC Ltd firming up their proposals and submitting a planning application.

At this point it should be noted that no agreement has been entered into with Widnes FC Ltd. Officers have now got the discussions to a stage where the Council needs to consider if Widnes FC Ltd should be encouraged to invest significant time and resources in preparing a planning application. No assurances have given to Widnes FC that a planning application will be successful. Thus the heads of terms will remain in draft format until such time council approval is given.

If approval to proceed with a lease is granted, then following the applicants planning submission, the planning documentation will need to be sent to Fields in Trust for review and approval. As long as there are not any significant changes to the plans already presented then Fields in Trust do not expect to change their position/conditions of lease.

#### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The Council adopted the Halton Local Football Facilities Plan in 2019 as the go to document for investment priorities. The development Plan identified King George V playing fields as requiring investment to improve the natural grass pitches. The emerging Halton Playing Pitch Strategy will also identify the site as a significant resource for grass roots football and recommends investment in the grass pitches.

#### **5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The building is in a generally tired state of repair. The building condition survey in 2019 of the changing rooms identified that mechanical and

electrical works are required to be undertaken within the next couple of years and work to internal walls due to damp.

The Council currently has the liability of the ongoing maintenance / running costs of the building and pitches. In the last financial year the costs were approximately £41,000.

If the Council were to grant the Lease, this would remove any future maintenance liability.

The Council does not have a plan to invest in the facility in the near future

Widnes FC Ltd have invested resources in preparing draft plans and pitch surveys.

In order to bring the project forward Widnes FC Ltd anticipate investing over £1million in the development of the building and playing fields.

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

### **6.1 Children and Young People in Halton**

Widnes FC Ltd, provide out of school sports activity for 250+ children and young people. The lease would give the club a base to develop and expand activities.

### **6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton**

Sport activity provides volunteer opportunities and skill development in coaching, administration, fundraising etc. Widnes FC Ltd's proposal includes the establishment of a football education programme, supporting lifelong learning and increasing employment opportunities.

### **6.3 A Healthy Halton**

The importance of exercise and staying active is a key message delivered by Government and all partners. Being active is recognised as contributing towards everyone's health and well-being. Widnes FC Ltd is a community club engaging with players, parents, coaches and volunteers across the age range.

### **6.4 A Safer Halton**

The connection between sport and reducing anti-social behaviour and the fear of crime is supported by key research. Sports activities and competitions, sports volunteering, sports leadership, sports training help develop individuals and communities, encourage healthier and more productive lifestyles and create inclusive communities and neighbourhoods that provide a shared identity and sense of place

## 6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

Widnes FC Ltd are looking to invest in a facility that is in poor condition. Investment will increase the programme of activity on offer and make it attractive to Halton residents and visitors.

## 7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

Any lease poses a risk to the Council. The tenant may not comply with their obligations such as repair, or they may wish to terminate the Lease, leaving the Council with a decision of what to do. There are mitigations to reduce the risk, such as, landlords consent for any alterations. Monitoring of the building should be ongoing to ensure that the site does not fall into disrepair and that all lease conditions are being met.

Any planning application has risks associated with uncertainty from the applicant, such as, securing funding, material availability, securing regulatory consents, ground conditions. To mitigate the risk, detailed project planning and survey work will be required by Widnes FC Ltd prior to the commencement of any works.

## 8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

The Recreation Club is not currently accessible by all; the first floor does not have any lift access. The development proposal will need to be fully accessible for all; as such, there are no equality and diversity issues

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

<b>Document</b>	<b>Place of Inspection</b>	<b>Contact Officer</b>
Halton Local Football Development Plan	Public document available <u><a href="#">online</a></u>	Sue Lowrie