

9 October 2019		ITEM: 11
Cabinet		
Billet Field Site, Stanford-le-Hope		
Wards and communities affected: Stanford-le-Hope West and Corringham and Fobbing	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Councillor Mark Coxshall, Portfolio Holder, Regeneration and Strategic Planning		
Accountable Assistant Director: Detlev Munster, Assistant Director Property & Development		
Accountable Director: Andy Millard, Interim Director Place		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

In April 2014, Cabinet agreed to the disposal of land at Billet Field to facilitate the relocation of the East Thurrock United Football Club (ETUFC) and promote the redevelopment of the current club site for housing development.

This approval was conditioned to include, amongst others, the need to obtain planning permission for both sites, to provide residential development at the current site, the re-provision of sports facilities at Billet Field, and the need to ensure the re-provided facilities were accessible to Thurrock residents.

After a period of inactivity, the Council were contacted by ETUFC in April 2019, indicating that they are now in a position to finalise this land swap and requesting that the Council confirm its willingness to still proceed with the transaction.

There has been a five year delay between Cabinet's decision in April 2014 to approve the disposal of Billet Field and the contact from ETUFC in 2019. During this period, the Council has reviewed its corporate priorities and seen changes in the wider policy context, including two stages of consultation with the Local Plan and the emergence of alternative uses for the site, as well as inflationary increases in land values and development costs. Consequently, it is not considered appropriate to continue with the disposal of this site at this current time.

1. Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1.1 Consider the contents of this report and agree that the request to progress with the disposal of Billet Field be declined at this time.

2. Background

Billet Field Site

2.1 The Billet Field site is approximately 9.5 acres in size, and is currently laid to playing fields (two adult football pitches in present use, together with a cricket square). The changing room block was refurbished prior to 2014.

2.2 There is also a bowls club, which is in poor condition and no longer functioning, a club house pavilion and a bowling green and two tennis courts which are also disused and in poor condition. The pavilion is currently under an occupation that needs to be regularised.

2014 Cabinet Decision

2.3 Cabinet agreed to the disposal of the Billet Field to the ETUFC on the 9 April 2014. The disposal was conditional upon:

- planning consents being given for the residential development of the existing ground at Rookery Field and for the sports development of the Billet Field.
- a contractual requirement for ETUFC to maintain the new playing surfaces at the Billet Field and the existing ones at the Mobil Field to a good standard, at no cost, while also ensuring community access at reasonable cost;
- formalised consequences for any failure to meet the above condition; this could require, in extremis, the title of the Billet Field land reverting to the Council, with a consequent lease and rent to be paid by the club;
- design of the proposed facilities being of suitable quality and scale for the variety of sports within the hub (both Billet and Mobil fields), including infrastructure requirements such as changing provision, storage, social areas, access and car parking etc.
- demonstration of gain in the scale and quality of facilities compared to the existing provision at the Billet, Mobil field and ETUFC; specifying how existing users will be accommodated rather than being displaced or compromised;
- the agreement of detailed and specific governance arrangements of the new sports hub, and a business plan for its operation and management, showing that the scheme is robust and sustainable, including a pricing policy which reflects the intended community use.

2.4 Subject to the above conditions being met, Cabinet agreed to dispose the Billet Field site to ETUFC for £340,000.

Public Consultation of the disposal

2.5 Under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council is required to consult on the disposal of public open space. Consultation was undertaken in 2013. The outcome of the public consultation concerning the potential disposal was as follows:

- Five submissions of objection, one including a petition signed by 184 people. The objections centred on fears of loss of access to the current playing fields, noise, litter, light pollution, alcohol associated nuisance, parking and traffic issues along residential roads and the potential for unsightly buildings
- One response supporting the proposal, citing the Club's history involving the Billet site and the benefit to the local community; including improved specialist facilities, the club's delivery of recreation and coaching to youngsters, women's and disability sides and their support of charities including St Luke's Hospice
- Following the closure of the consultation there have been further approaches expressing concerns about ETUFC acquiring the land, including from a local football club that was using the playing fields at the time.

Recent correspondence from ETUFC

2.6 In April 2019, ETUFC submitted indicative designs for the proposed sports facility at Billet Field. Different site options were proposed, but the offer would generally include: a sports pavilion with changing rooms, gym, social area; spectator seating; 4 football pitches; parking.

2.7 An outline plan for the East Thurrock Community Sports Association accompanied the indicative design document, but this document is stated to still be under development.

2.8 In its letter to the Council in April 2019, ETUFC points out that the sale of the football ground at Rookery Hill was delayed due to an internal legal issue but the club is now in a position to progress and has agreed a deal, in principle, with Bellway Homes. It is also pointed out that Bellway Homes will shortly be submitting a planning application for Rookery Hill which will have a linked application for the Billet Field site.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis

Issues related to the details contained in the recent letter

3.1 The proposals presented to the council by ETUFC are only indicative and further information is required. In particular, the proposal is silent on the Mobil Field and is also silent on how the facilities will provide and promote public/community access.

- 3.2 In 2014, the site was valued at circa £285k to reflect its use as sport pitches. However, open space is currently transacting at circa £50k per acre suggesting a possible current use value of the Billet Field Site at circa £463k.
- 3.3 External valuation advice obtained in 2014 pointed out that with planning permission, the Rookery Field site would have a value of circa £5.85m. Given the Club's need to recreate its current facilities elsewhere, this would equate to an increase in value of around £3.6m. According to the valuer, given that the Council would be enabling this development, it would not be unreasonable for it to share in the increased value of the development site at Rookery Field, and commercially it could seek to negotiate a disposal of its land at Billet Field at between £890,000 - £1,180,000.
- 3.4 In 2014, the net annual cost of the Council's stewardship of the Billet Field was around £16,500 taking into account the cost of maintenance, less income received. The net annual cost of maintaining the neighbouring Mobil Field was in excess of £11,000. The alternative maintenance of these sites would present the Council with an annual savings of c. £28,000 per annum, which was estimated to equate to a capital receipt in excess of £300,000.
- 3.5 In arriving at a value in 2014, Cabinet considered both the annual savings it would achieve as well as the social use value that could be attributed with the proposed provision of community sports facilities. Hence a lower disposal value was derived to that of the external valuer.
- 3.6 However, it is now considered that these principles and approach need to be reviewed in light of the time lapsed (with resultant inflationary increases in land values and development costs) and the strategic developments set out below.

Corporate priorities and policy context

- 3.7 Billet Field was scrutinised as part of the 3Rs Programme in 2017 and the site was identified for "reuse". The site presented an opportunity to consolidate recreational open space and release part of the site for development. The Council's Housing team consider the site suitable for housing development, notwithstanding its current planning status as Green Belt.
- 3.8 However, the Council's Environment service has also identified this land for other potential uses, such as a possible site for cemetery expansion. Plans for this are in their very early stages and feasibility is being assessed. It is therefore important that any future decision about Billet Field takes into account other possible uses for the site.
- 3.9 The Local Plan has also progressed through two stages of consultation since the 2014 Cabinet resolution. Matters relating to how sports/recreation provision are some of the key issues that need to be addressed as the Local Plan progresses.

3.10 In light of these facts, it is considered that the disposal of this land at this time and in this context would not be appropriate.

4. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

4.1 As set out in the April 2014 paper to Cabinet, the previous public consultation exercise resulted in concerns being raised over the potential disposal of the land. These included matters relating to the loss of access to the playing fields and are linked to therefore to the wider strategic/policy matters highlighted above.

4.2 If the proposed deal were to go ahead, there would need to be further public consultations about the proposals.

5. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

5.1 There has been a delay of five years between Cabinet's decision (in April 2014) to approve the disposal of Billet Field (subject to the conditions outlined in the report) and the contact from ETUFC in April 2019, informing the Council that they would now like to proceed. During this time period, corporate priorities and the wider policy context have changed, as explained in paragraphs 3.7 to 3.11 above. Consequently, for the reasons set out in those paragraphs, it is not considered appropriate to continue with the disposal of this site at this current time.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial

Implications verified by:

Rosie Hurst

Interim Senior Management Accountant

The lack of progress with negotiations with ETUFC means that the potential capital receipt has not been included in budget considerations, so there would be no direct financial implications if the proposed disposal to ETUFC were not to proceed as originally agreed by Cabinet in April 2014.

The 2014 Cabinet paper also highlighted associated revenue savings (estimated in 2014 as £28,000) from ETUFC taking over the Council's stewardship of Billet Field and Mobil Field. As this has also not happened, the potential revenue savings will not be realised.

The delay of five years between Cabinet's decision and the request from ETUFC to progress will also have an impact on the prices involved, with the inflation of land prices and development costs throughout this time. The financial elements of the proposed deal would have to be revisited to adjust sale price to allow for these impacts, if the deal were to proceed.

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
**Acting Head of Legal, Assistant Director
Law and Governance, and Monitoring
Officer**

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

6.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
**Strategic Lead, Community Development
and Equalities**

There are no Diversity and Equality implications.

6.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children)

None

7. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Cabinet Report, April 2014: "Potential Disposal of Billet Field, Stanford Le Hope"

8. Appendices to the report

None

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