

LEISURE FACILITIES IN LEIGHTON-LINSLADE

The Issue

Central Bedfordshire Council are consulting until 22 July on their proposal to invest £25 million in a new leisure facility on land to the east of Leighton-Linslade (albeit outside the current town boundary). It is stated that, once the proposed leisure centre is complete and ready for use, the existing Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre in Linslade to the west of the town centre would be closed.

The new Leisure Centre is to be welcomed and will be a very positive addition to the facilities available to the town and surrounding area. However, there remains the question of the future of the Tiddenfoot site, including the detrimental impacts of its potential closure for many people and, should it be closed, the alternative uses for the site. These are extremely significant matters which require a concurrent examination.

Motion

That the following recommendations be conveyed to Central Bedfordshire Council on behalf of the Leighton-Linslade Partnership Committee:

- That serious consideration be given (in the light of the points made below) following the consultation period, to the case for the continuation of Tiddenfoot as a leisure facility with such management and organisational changes as may be necessary for this to be feasible
- That, in the event that such continuation does not prove practical, serious consideration be given to the continuation (and improvement) of such facilities which may be able to continue in use for the community whether through transfer to third parties or agreement with Cedars Upper School to minimise the disbenefits to the local and surrounding community
- That, in the event of a more general closure of Tiddenfoot as a Leisure Centre, a firm commitment be given to its continuation as a community hub with serious and urgent consideration being given to the functions it might perform under this heading, in consultation with the community.

The Significance and Community Role of Tiddenfoot

Central Bedfordshire Council's Leisure Facilities and Action Plan acknowledges that as well as the facilities and activities they provide, leisure centres have a wider role in creating and sustaining a vibrant and viable community, promoting community cohesion by offering social space for individuals and groups to interact and to bring people together. While, clearly, the new centre will be far better located for residents in the new developments to the east of Leighton-Linslade, Tiddenfoot has identified locational advantages which are not shared by the proposed situation of the new centre. In addition, it is one of few service activities still possessed in the Linslade area,

which has seen a progressive migration of facilities away from this former separate urban district and community to the Leighton Buzzard Town Centre and east, since Linslade's incorporation in Leighton-Linslade in the mid-1960s.

Tiddenfoot's Location

Again, as noted in Central Bedfordshire Council's Leisure Facilities and Action Plan, it is important that sports and leisure facilities deliver "conveniently co-located facilities for residents", and that accessibility to sports' facilities is improved, in order to encourage greater participation by all sectors of the community.

The Sport England report on Central Bedfordshire Swimming Pools noted that "The Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre is the better location for swimming demand in the Leighton Buzzard area". This remained the case in 2028. Whilst the proposed new pool would meet demand, it concluded that "on all counts, the Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre Pool is a better location, to meet the demand in the Leighton Buzzard quadrant. The option to modernise the Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre is a better option, than replacement of it, with provision of a new pool site at Leighton/Linslade". This finding appears to arise from the fact that the highest demand for swimming in the area is located south and west of the proposed new site.

The recommendation in the Indoor Leisure Facilities Strategy and Action Plan that, if the Tiddenfoot Leisure Swimming Pool is not to be retained, then consideration should be given to its transfer as a community asset to Cedars School or a consortium of local swimming clubs, including for local school use, would appear sensible if that scenario is followed

Similarly, Sports England found that Tiddenfoot was the better location for a Sports Hall facility both in 2018 and 2028 which emphasises the need for continuity of the present provision, given the absence of this element at the proposed new centre. Sports England concluded that "It would be preferable to retain the Tiddenfoot sports hall site and if it is feasible, consider further improvements to it". Of course, this would depend on continued co-existence with the use of the hall by Cedars School. Here, there would need to be clarification if the course advocated in Central Bedfordshire Council's Leisure Facilities and Action Plan is followed, where it was recommended that the Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre sports' hall be retained for curriculum use and its transfer considered to the Upper School.

It is also important to note that the presumed relative ease of access to the proposed new facility on the east of the town, for those within the Tiddenfoot catchment area to the west in particular, is arguably over-optimistic. Except for those who live extremely close to a leisure facility, car journeys are currently the overwhelming means of access. To reach the new leisure centre, those to the west have the unenviable choice of access (a) via the A4146/515 by-pass and Eastern Relief Road. The bypass is frequently congested around peak times and this is often not the easiest of routes as well as being quite a lengthy journey, (b) through the centre of Leighton-Linslade which is easily the most direct route but very frequently heavily congested and extremely slow therefore,

or (c) a northern circuit via Old Linslade, Heath Road and eg Shenley Hill Road which would introduce additional traffic on local roads as well as being a lengthy journey. There are also currently questions over the delivery of future cycling and bus service facilities to and from the eastern extension to the town. There would be sustainability advantages, therefore, in maintaining facilities at Tiddenfoot.

Concluding Remarks

While it is noted in the Central Bedfordshire Executive Report of 7 December 2021, that the “Tiddenfoot centre is 40+ years old and is no longer fit for purpose”, the reason for this – if it is indeed the case – might well be questioned when many older facilities are in good use throughout the country.

It is accepted that the work so far undertaken on the new leisure centre suggested that only one centre is currently required for the near-term future in Leighton-Linslade and that retention of Tiddenfoot could negatively impact the viability and affordability of both facilities. Nevertheless, it is clear that the closure of Tiddenfoot would disadvantage many people and its location has many positives. It would, therefore, be an option, before any final decision is taken and as previously foreseen in the Indoor Leisure Facilities Strategy and Action Plan – Report on Findings, to undertake a new detailed study on options for retaining the Tiddenfoot Centre with emphasis on any necessary changes to its management and operation to improve viability, especially in the light of responses to the Consultation. Under the current proposals there will also still remain several gaps in the leisure facilities provision in the Leighton-Linslade area such as indoor tennis, indoor bowls, boxing, and adequate dance performance space, though it is accepted that not everything for everyone can be catered for.

It is very clear that Tiddenfoot is a valued community asset. But, should any partial or total closure be decided upon in due course, then the question arises of the future use of part or the whole of the site. There would be the greatest local resistance and opposition to the loss of a community facility, especially if it were to be sold for example for housing development. Consequently, consideration should then be given to other community uses of the space. At one end of the spectrum this could include civic (town council, Central Bedfordshire) offices, a police hub, or a health hub, though location and suitability would here be critical questions to answer. Apart from such uses, other community activity could, however, be considered such as meeting space for clubs and societies, social or day care related activity, soft play facilities, business start-up offices....and many more. The essential feature would be to retain Tiddenfoot as a community hub.

16 May 2022