

# EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION



<b>REPORT OF:</b>	Executive Member for Public Health and Wellbeing
<b>LEAD OFFICERS:</b>	Executive Member for Environment Director of Public Health and Wellbeing Director of Environment and Operations
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>07/07/2019</b>

<b>PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED:</b>	Environmental Services	Public Health and Wellbeing
<b>WARD/S AFFECTED:</b>	Darwen East	

**SUBJECT: Proposal to asset transfer Blacksnape Playing Fields and Changing Rooms**

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To seek approval for the asset transfer of Blacksnape Playing Fields, associated changing rooms and car parking to a suitable club, league or organisation capable of managing and maintaining the largest outdoor sports provision in Darwen (9 football pitches: 3 x full size adult pitches, 4 x three quarter size pitches and 2 x 9v9 pitches)

It is important to secure an alternative operating model that will increase the access and usage of this prominent Darwen facility, deliver regular match play on the pitches, improve the playing pitch conditions, maintain the site for recreational participation by the local community and mitigate financial risk.

The benefit to the local community is that they will continue to have access to Blacksnape Playing Fields for a range of recreational activities including football and cricket, but also as a key piece of green space in Darwen popular with dog walkers and families too. The pitches / grass will have improved maintenance and cutting enhancing the green space for all.

The opportunity would be advertised to all teams, clubs and organisations in the Borough via the Council's procurement portal The Chest and a robust, transparent selection process undertaken to ensure that the best possible partner is identified to operate this facility.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Member:

- Notes the financial risks and potential grant claw-back associated with 'doing nothing'.
- Approves the asset transfer of Blacksnape Playing Fields on a 25 year lease from the Council
- Approves the advertisement of the asset transfer opportunity via the Chest and the undertaking of a robust and transparent assessment process to identify and secure the successful operator.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

Blacksnape playing fields attracted £900,000 of funding investment in 2008 to build new changing facilities and improve some of the pitches. This extensive outdoor facility is available for use by the football fraternity, has cricket wicket provision and is enjoyed as an open greenspace by the local community.

The development plan, 10 years ago sought to drive increased use of these pitches (football and cricket) with the new facilities. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons this has not happened. The council had expected a large increase in the need for cricket facilities in the Borough based on demographic evidence supported by insight from the English Cricket Board, the governing body. This has not occurred and there has actually been a decline in the number of teams in the cricket league.

Due to budget cuts the maintenance on the grass pitches has reduced; as such the Blacksnape football pitches now need further investment to improve the drainage particularly in the bottom four pitches. Currently, due to the poor condition of pitches and in part to the exposed location the facility is only used very occasionally for booked matches and no games have been played there at all for the last three months. There are very few Darwen or Blackburn teams playing on the pitches; Blacksnape pitches are the borough's second largest outdoor sports and pitch provision and should be utilised far more than they currently are.

#### Grant Funding

The site attracted c. £700,000 from the Football Foundation (FF) and a £200,000 contribution from Darwen Academy (DACA) to renovate the pitches and construct a new changing block. This project was completed in 2008

In line with the terms and condition of the FF grant the Council have to respond annually to a monitoring and evaluation regime. This reports on the number of games, age groups, gender, number of coaches and other criteria operating at the site. The information currently being reported does not demonstrate that the facility is delivering the outcomes agreed when the funding was approved, meaning that the site is failing in monitoring terms.

Like other grant funders, the FF could seek to claw back their investment if the current usage were to continue and this would have significant financial impact on the council.

#### Pitch Asset Transfers

There are a number of good practice examples in the Borough where pitches have been successfully transferred to clubs and third sector organisations. These include Woolridge pitches at Pleckgate, Roman Road, Griffin Park and Green Lane pitches. These sites now have volunteers involved in the running and maintenance of these sites and they are certainly more valued in the community. All the asset transferred sites are running successfully with 500 matches being played on Woolridge Pitches alone this last season.

Clubs like the asset transfer model as it gives them ownership and a 'home ground' to train and play matches on. To hold on-site competitions for boys, girls, men and ladies which can be used for income generation and increase the overall usage of the site. Clubs / organisations are responsible for the maintenance of the site; grass cutting, marking out and end of season maintenance. This creates a saving to the Council

The model works well and with a clear tender / expression of interest process there is transparency in the decision making and clubs etc are fully aware of their responsibilities and expectations.

#### Proposal for Blacksnape

To seek an alternative operating model that will increase the access and usage of this prominent Darwen facility.

It is proposed to offer the site for asset transfer to a suitable club, league or organisation capable of operating it and improving the management of it; delivering the participation levels that meet the FF required outcomes and thereby reducing the financial risk to the Council from any potential, future clawback of the FF grant received in 2008.

Following an initial scoping exercise there is interest from a number of clubs / leagues in the Borough who would have the capability of taking on and managing this sizable site. The opportunity would be advertised to all teams and clubs in the Borough via the council's procurement portal The Chest and a robust selection process undertaken to ensure that we have the best possible partner on board to operate this facility.

The benefit to the local community is that they will continue to have access to Blacksnape Playing Fields for a range of recreational activities including football and cricket, but also as a key piece of green space in Darwen popular with dog walkers and families too. The pitches / grass will have improved maintenance and cutting enhancing the green space for all.

#### **4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS**

As the biggest outdoor pitch asset in Darwen (9 football pitches: 3 x full size adult pitches, 4 x three quarter size pitches and 2 x 9v9 pitches), Blacksnape is lacking investment, is significantly under-used and therefore is not being maximised for the benefit of local residents or for sporting participation levels across the borough as a whole.

Without agreeing an alternative, improved operational model i.e. 'do nothing', the Council may have to pay-back the FF grant investment unless action is taken to increase the number of games played, including the number of boys, girls, men and ladies number of coaches and other FA priorities participating at the site. The asset transfer proposal seeks to minimise the risk of any future grant clawback.

Despite a reduced maintenance schedule in order to deliver budget efficiencies, there is still an ongoing pitch maintenance cost to the Council (Environment & Operations Dept). Whilst there will be the need for the Council to continue to contribute to the important seasonal maintenance of the 2 Darwen Academy pitches (under the legal agreement with DACA) there are some small cashable savings that can be realised across the site as a whole through an asset transfer arrangement such as utilities and business rates.

There is adequate cricket provision on the Pleasington pitches to accommodate the small number of mid-week and weekend matches relocated from Blacksnape. Alternatively, the successful operator may wish to develop local partnerships to promote cricket use during the summer period.

In addition, if the facility is asset transferred to a community operator, they will then be able to bid for external, additional funding from the FF (and other grant funding bodies) to secure investment to improve the drainage, especially of the bottom four pitches that are wet and in winter are unusable. There is also the potential to operate a small café from the changing block; if pursued, this would benefit local families and walkers as well as teams and supporters.

It is important to gain consensus to put the asset transfer out to 'tender' via The Chest as soon as possible in order to provide adequate time for the evaluation of interested parties, appointment of the successful club/organisation, and to give time for them to set up their maintenance schedule ahead of the start of the football season in September 2019.

The facility's overall client liaison function will still remain within the Public Health and Wellbeing portfolio.

## 5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Asset transfer is something that as a Council has endorsed across services to promote community ownership and involvement. This new way of working ensures that facilities are improved and utilised more.

## 6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Asset transfer will assist in mitigating the risk of clawback from the Council of the FF grant provided in 2008 of £700,000.

As part of the DACA/Council lease agreement, the Council will continue to make an annual contribution from the Environmental Services portfolio budget to the operator of £11,000 to cover; the site requirements which include:

- Putting up (August) and taking down goals (April) for the 2 DACA pitches
- Marking out the 2 DACA pitches each week
- Emptying the litterbins on the pitch/car park minimum of twice a week
- Mowing of the whole playing fields once a week during the grass growing season

The changing block will continue to be maintained by the Council, although operational building costs including utilities and NNDR will be transferred as part of the lease agreement.

## 7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The asset transfer process will follow the Council's procurement process and utilise the Chest portal. It will follow a procurement process agreed with the Service Lead – Contracts and Procurement to ensure a robust selection process and identification of a suitable operator.

The successful tenant will operate under a long term 25 year lease agreement which will be managed by a client function in Leisure. The Lease agreement shall be in a form approved by Legal Services.

Consent from previous grant funders shall be obtained to mitigate any risk of clawback.

## 8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The changing room block will remain a Council asset.

There will be staff resource benefits for Environment and Operations Dept realised from the removal of the maintenance function.

## 9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

**Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.**

Option 1  Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2  In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA link here)*

Option 3  In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA attachment)*

#### **10. CONSULTATIONS**

There is 0.5 FTE staff member assigned to Blacksnape changing rooms. The post is not at risk but will move to Witton Park to join the team covering the 3G pitches and the increased opening hours for this exciting new site. This person has been consulted as per Council policy.

Informal consultations have taken place with some clubs and leagues to understand the level of interest in the site.

The Lancashire Football Association are aware of the intention to explore an alternative operating model in order to increase usage and they are supportive of this approach

#### **11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE**

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

#### **12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded and published if applicable.

<b>VERSION:</b>	<b>2</b>
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<b>CONTACT OFFICER:</b>	<b>Graham Harris</b>
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<b>DATE:</b>	27/06/2019
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<b>BACKGROUND PAPER:</b>	Executive Member Briefing Paper 07/06/2019
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