

JOINT MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE AND YOUTH POLICY AND REVIEW PANELS

Meeting held on Tuesday, 7th November, 2017 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cllr Mrs. D.B. Bedford (Chairman)
Cllr D.S. Gladstone (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr T.D. Bridgeman
Cllr J.B. Canty
Cllr Sue Carter
Cllr Liz Corps
Cllr P.I.C. Crerar
Cllr K. Dibble
Cllr Sue Dibble
Cllr C.P. Grattan
Cllr A. Jackman
Cllr J.H. Marsh
Cllr Marina Munro
Cllr J.J. Preece
Cllr L.A. Taylor

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Cllr Sophia Choudhary.

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED: That Cllr Mrs. D.B. Bedford be appointed Chairman for the joint meeting of the Environment and Leisure and Youth Policy and Review Panels.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED: That Cllr. D.S. Gladstone be appointed Vice-Chairman for the joint meeting of the Environment and Leisure and Youth Policy and Review Panels.

3. SOUTHWOOD GOLF COURSE - CONSULTATION

The Joint Panel meeting considered the options for the future of Southwood Golf Course following the completion of the recent consultation. The Joint Panel was asked to make a recommendation to the Cabinet which was scheduled to consider the issue on Tuesday 12th December, 2017. The Cabinet Members for Leisure and Youth (Cllr M.L. Sheehan) and Environment and Service Delivery (Cllr M.J. Tennant) were in attendance.

The consultation had been carried out due to a requirement for the Council to identify additional Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) to continue to deliver the regeneration of the Borough's town centres and meet housing needs. The purpose of the consultation was to seek views on the option of converting Southwood Golf Course into new natural open parkland which would become SANG and allow for around 2,500 new homes to be built in the Borough.

The Joint Panel received a presentation from the Head of Community and Environmental Services which provided information on the SANG requirement and options in Rushmoor, the background to Southwood Golf Course, results of the consultation process and options for the way forward.

SANG was required as the whole of Rushmoor Borough was located within 5km of the Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (SPA). European law required housing developers to provide or contribute towards SANG as an alternative for recreational activities to encourage visitors away from the SPA. Current SANG had diminished with only 23 dwellings left in Rushmoor at the end August 2017. The housing need in Rushmoor from 2014-2032 required a minimum of 7,850 new dwellings. To date 836 had been completed with a further 4,897 permissions granted with SANG allocation. The Wellesley Woodland SANG had been ringfenced for the 3,850 properties in the Wellesley development. To deliver the housing numbers identified in the Local Plan, SANG was required for up to 3,000 new homes.

The Council had already explored alternative options for the provision of SANG for the Borough including Ball Hill in Farnborough and Farnham Quarry but neither were viable due to landowner aspirations and Natural England requirements. There were emerging options at Bramshot and Hawley Park Farm, Blandford House and Tongham Pools and the Council was also exploring with Natural England whether there was any residual surplus SANG at Wellesley. None of these sites were within Council ownership and therefore could not be guaranteed.

Due to the difficulties in identifying other potential SANG in Rushmoor the Cabinet had considered the possibility of converting the Southwood Golf Course into natural open parkland to include walking, cycling, fitness trails and natural play structures. The tender for the Golf Course was due for renewal in Spring 2019 and it currently cost the Council £40,000 per annum. The Council recognised the social, sporting and health benefits the Golf Course provided and that 25,000 rounds per annum rounds of golf were played by casual players, season ticket holders, club members and societies. There were alternative golf courses within a ten mile radius which generally accepted new members and casual players but it was noted that these were more expensive. Southwood Golf Course had the benefit of being flat and easy to get around for those with mobility health issues.

The consultation was carried out to help inform any decision made on the future of the Golf Course and the provision of SANG. The consultation had taken place throughout August and September and had been widely promoted through the web, social media, leaflet drops, press releases, static displays and meetings. The consultation had generated 2,413 responses. Overall, 39% were in favour of closing the Golf Course to provide natural parkland and 61% in favour of keeping it open.

However, from known Rushmoor residents, 50.6% were in favour of closing the Golf Course and turning it into parkland and 49.4% wanted to keep the Golf Course open. If the Golf Course was to close, of 1,330 respondents, 42% indicated they would give up playing golf, 29% would play less often and 29% would play at another course. Details were provided on what respondents would like to see if a new natural parkland was created which included walking and dog walking, cycle paths and natural trails as well as keeping a Golf Course. Comments from those wanting to close the Golf Course included the need for more parkland, parkland would benefit more people than the Golf Course and that it would allow more housing. Comments from respondents wanting to keep the course open included that it was affordable, there was already plenty of open space, health benefits and it was the best public course in the area.

A petition has also been received signed by 2,366 petitioners from Save Our Southwood Campaign Team. The petition accepted the need for additional housing but believed there were other ways of achieving the housing targets and the Council had enough SANG provision to meet requirements up to 2032 in the absence of Southwood Golf Course. The petition would be presented to the Council on 7th December, 2017.

The options proposed for consideration by the Joint Panel to recommend to Cabinet were:

- Close Southwood Golf Course to provide guaranteed SANG to support the regeneration of the town centres particularly Aldershot, provide additional Borough wide housing and provide open parkland available for everyone to use for walking, cycling and informal recreation.
- Explore the feasibility of providing a self funding nine hole golf course and the release of sufficient SANG to enable the regeneration of the Aldershot Town Centre and housing development to the south of the Borough.
- Retain Southwood Golf Course and continue to look for alternative SANG, recognising this could either prevent, limit or slow the regeneration of Aldershot Town Centre and housing development to the south of the Borough.

The Joint Panel requested that the Cabinet Members in attendance were available to answer questions only and should not be invited to make any representation.

The Joint Panel received representation from Helen Perry who was in favour of keeping Southwood Golf Course open primarily from an educational improvement perspective. Ms. Perry was of the opinion that the Golf Course should stay open in its full capacity. However, if it needed to be a smaller course to enable some housing there were some viable options. Ms. Perry suggested that the whole area should be a sports/leisure area which could include the Golf Course, cricket club and football club and provide space for sports science and health and well being facilities in line with higher and further education. The Council could work with local colleges to develop a sports academy to provide sport and environmental facilities for young people. Local schools could also make use of the Golf Course facilities for sports

education and environmental studies. The Council needed to consider the needs of young people and ensure there was future provision of facilities.

In response to questions Ms. Perry confirmed that the proposal was for access to facilities for the two further education colleges and three secondary schools to be able to provide outdoor education. It was also suggested that there could be a compromise to enable some of the Golf Course to remain open and use the rest for educational purposes. The Golf Course needed ambition to promote facilities to youths in the area and smart, creative and ambitious people needed to be employed to achieve success. There was also the opportunity to provide the educational facilities as open parkland. Ms. Perry asked if the Council had considered using some of the football stadium land in the Borough for SANG as there was a lot of provision for football in the area.

The Joint Panel received representation from Mike Bartley on behalf of David Scott who had been unable to attend the meeting in person. Mr. Scott was a wounded military veteran who had taken up golf as part of his rehabilitation. Southwood Golf Course had been the only course in the area willing to provide support through coaching, reduced green fees and a golf buggy which ultimately enabled Mr. Scott to take part in the Invictus Games and go on to win a gold medal in golf. Southwood Golf Course was a well suited course for disabled people. The Golf Course had also played a significant role in building Mr. Scott's confidence through the social aspect and interaction with other players.

The Joint Panel then received representations from Mike Bartley, Keith Ledgerwood and Barry Gilmore who spoke on behalf of the Golf Course users, families and local residents who wished to see the course remain open. The closure of the Golf Course to provide SANG to protect three types of bird was believed to be unnecessary as it was felt there was no evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of the mitigation. The provision of SANG to dissuade people from walking on the SPAs was felt to be inadequate. There was already lots of natural green spaces in the Borough but only one accessible, affordable pay and play golf course. The Golf Course provided a social hub for people of all ages but in particular provided a healthy social community environment for senior citizens. Young people could also play at a very reasonable cost and without the limitations associated with private clubs. Southwood Golf Course also provided a good quality course that was virtually level and accessible by golfers who would otherwise struggle on a hilly course.

The statements made by the Council were questioned relating to a number of issues. The £40,000 subsidy was felt to be a false saving as it was believed that most of the subsidy was for rates which would not be generated if the land was converted to SANG. The figures for rounds of golf played was believed to be 30,000 in the year to September 2017, which benefited more than just the 175 members. The fact that the course was not economically viable was disputed as annual revenue was estimated at between £400,000 and £500,000; it was highlighted that this was a speculative figure, as Mack Trading figures had not been accessed. There was disagreement that golf was in decline with a recent England Golf Impact Report showing that there was a significant demand for golf in Rushmoor. The purpose and priority to improve the quality of local people's lives would be achieved by keeping the Golf Course open for those people that played golf.

The housing figures required for SANG and the SANG already available were raised. It was suggested that the SANG required for 7,848 dwellings to 2032 could be met from the 5,531 already allocated and identified and from SANG that would become available from the Blandford House development and Bramshot Farm. It was proposed that the standard occupancy rate applied by Natural England of 2.4 people per home was high as the planned homes were predominantly one or two bedroom homes and a lower occupancy rate of 2 could be proposed. If the occupancy rate was lowered the mitigation would be for 2,645 homes which would be sufficient to exceed the requirement by 328 homes. In addition, recent Government consultation could reduce the overall housing requirement by more than 2,500 homes. It was proposed that the Council should wait until after the outcome of the Government consultation in April 2018 before making any decision to close the Golf Course.

The parameters used to set out the catchment areas for SANG were then questioned. It was requested that the Council discussed with Natural England some flexibility in the application of the SANG catchment area and the formula applied to hectares per person.

There was disagreement with the statement about there being a number of alternative courses where golfers could turn up and play without being members. The other courses in the area either: would not let non-members play at a weekend; were prohibitively expensive in comparison to Southwood; had limited or zero availability for membership; or, were hilly and long and not suitable for those with a disability or more senior, less mobile golfers. In the survey 42% of respondents said they would give up golf if the course closed which would not fit with the Council's corporate policy to improve the quality of local people's lives and promote health and wellbeing.

Those representing the users of the Golf Course read out two letters of support from charities that had benefited from fund raising through society matches and other fund raising events. Southwood golfers had raised approaching £500,000 for charities. The Golf Course was seen as a valuable local recreational asset by the charities and societies which brought revenue not only to the course but also to the local area and many were repeat visitors.

The Joint Panel raised a number of questions in response to the representations made. It was asked whether a 9-hole course would be a viable solution and would be accepted by the golfers. It was felt that a 9-hole course was not a viable solution and would be far less patronised by members. Those representing the users were of the view that there was no requirement to make the course into a 9-hole course as there was sufficient SANG elsewhere in the Borough and the Council should influence Natural England to apply some flexibility in the SANG requirement. It was also suggested that there could be a way of providing SANG and retaining the Golf Course in its current form by sharing the land and providing a public right of way.

Some members of the Joint Panel questioned the need to rush to make the decision. There were a number of issues that still needed to be considered before making a final decision on closing the Golf Course. It was suggested that the time should be used to lobby Government to amend the SANG legislation take into account urban

areas such as Rushmoor. Government assistance could also be sought to combine Hart, Surrey Heath and Rushmoor as one housing market area.

The Cabinet Member for Environment highlighted that there had been a number of SANG options explored before looking at Southwood Golf Course. The closure of the Golf Course was not an easy option to consider but there were no other options available. There was an urgent need to secure housing for the Borough, and he explained that there were currently 1,200 families on the waiting list for affordable housing and 100 families in temporary accommodation. Assurance was given that every effort would be made to lobby Government over the coming years to make SANG legislation more appropriate. Discussions had already been held with the local MP, Leo Docherty, to show that the SANG provisions were not suitable for an area like Rushmoor.

The Joint Panel acknowledged the requirement for affordable housing in the Borough and was keen to ensure any developments provided an appropriate amount of affordable and social housing. The Joint Panel was advised that the Council was able to influence the amount of social housing built as this was set out in the Local Plan and that local residents were offered accommodation in the social housing available. However, the Council had no influence over properties sold on the open market. Developers would have to provide a strong case to show that a development was not viable to provide social housing, and the case would be independently audited. If the independent audit showed the development to be viable the developer would be required to provide social housing.

Following a debate on the options open to the Council, it was proposed:

“That the decision regarding the future of the Southwood Golf Course be deferred for twelve months while all other options be pursued to include:

- Lobbying Government
- Seeking special dispensation for the area of Rushmoor in the way it is treated for SANG land, and;
- Examination of alternative SANG provision to provide the necessary mitigation for housing development in Rushmoor.”

After further discussion, the vote was taken with 8 voting for the proposal and 6 voting against. Therefore the proposal set out above was agreed for recommendation to Cabinet.

The meeting closed at 10.02 pm.

CLLR MRS. D.B. BEDFORD (CHAIRMAN)
