

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Thursday, 31 January 2019

Time: 6.00pm,

Location: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Contact: Ian Gourlay (01462) 242703

Members: Councillors: M Downing (Chair), M Hurst (Vice-Chair), L Briscoe, J Brown, D Cullen, J Fraser, L Kelly, A McGuinness, A Mitchell CC, S-J Potter and S Speller.

AGENDA

PART 1

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2. MINUTES - 3 DECEMBER 2018

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 3 December 2018.

Pages 3 – 8

3. REIMAGINING FAIRLANDS VALLEY PARK

To consider a presentation on proposals for the reimagining of Fairlands Valley Park.

Pages 9 – 22

4. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

To consider any Part 1 business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

5. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

To consider the following motions –

1. That under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

6. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

To consider any Part II business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

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STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 3 December 2018

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Michael Downing (Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, Jim Brown, David Cullen, James Fraser, Lizzy Kelly, Sarah-Jane Potter and Simon Speller

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.15pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr M Hurst, A McGuinness and A Mitchell.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 12 NOVEMBER 2018**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment and Economy Select Committee meeting held on 12 November 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **UPDATE ON EXECUTIVE MEMBER RESPONSE TO INDOOR MARKET SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Assistant Director (Stevenage Direct Services) provided an update on the Executive Member response to the Indoor Market Scrutiny Review. The Principal Recommendation was to request officers to engage an external company to carry out market research in order to find out what kind of market offer is required by the Town in the long term. Members were informed that quotations for the market research were expensive. The Council had commissioned the cost effective option of a feasibility study for future business development options or diversification through a specialist company called Spacemakers. Spacemakers have delivered a number of projects across the Greater London Authority and had delivered the transformation project for the Brixton Market.

A draft report had been received from Spacemakers and this was now under consideration. Members were informed that Stevenage Direct Services was working in collaboration with Regeneration and Communities and Neighbourhoods on future plans for the Indoor Market.

Members indicated that future plans for the Indoor Market must take into consideration the changing demographics of the Town and workers who commute to

the town. The Assistant Director confirmed that Spacemakers had been contracted to look at the options for the Indoor Market. The Indoor Markets team appreciated the different location and clientele settings for Brixton and Stevenage.

Officers had followed up on the short term recommendation to approach retailers to see what incentives would be required to restore access to the multi-storey car park. Retailers had not responded to invitations to make proposals regarding access to the Indoor Market. Retailers appeared not to have an appetite to reinstate public access to the Indoor Market. It was noted that retailers did not appear to have an appetite to reinstate public access due to previous shoplifting cases related to the access. The Council will continue to engage the retailers on this issue using all options including discussions relating to regeneration. Members were informed that significant public realm works had been completed at Market Place and Park Place and this would hopefully improve access routes for all Indoor Market customers. The Portfolio Holder (Resources) also highlighted the issue of step access to the Indoor Market.

With regard to the recommendation to improve the fabric of the building, it was indicated that officers were appraising potential options to improve the fabric of the market building. Findings and recommendations arising from the Spacemakers report will be incorporated into a business plan. This will be used to support a future capital bid for works to upgrade the internal fabric of the indoor market. It was noted that improvements had been done on the building in the past. Members highlighted the inconsistencies in stall design features. It was reported that due to financial constraints, all capital bids had to be supported by a business case. Projects were funded in accordance with business case priority.

After initially taking a more robust line with operating hours, and after taking into consideration feedback from traders, the Council is now reviewing this stance with a view of introducing some degree of flexibility to opening times. Members highlighted the change in shopping habits and the variety of shopping options available to customers. Members were informed that there was an even split between traders who preferred the current arrangement of fixed opening times on four days and those who in favour of flexible working hours. Security arrangements will be a key factor in determining the future schedule for the Indoor Market.

Members were informed that Town Centre and Indoor Market events are aligned to the free parking sessions provided by the Council. The 30 minute parking pilot is still in place. The Council is currently drafting a Parking Strategy. The Council had not carried out an analysis to determine whether the free parking spaces had boosted sales at the indoor market. Plans are in place to have a public mobile Wi-Fi network in the Town Centre. This will enable the Council to get estimates of the number of visitors to the market. It was noted that the free parking provision is not an incentive for those customers that rely on public transport. In response to a question, the Assistant Director stated that the Council is considering options such running a community transport service to the Indoor Market, public transport drop off points close to the Indoor Market and offering discounts and vouchers that can be used at the Indoor Market.

The Council recommendation to co-ordinate town centre and indoor market events is

being implemented in full. There is an annual town centre programme of events that includes specific market focussed events. Traders continue to have access to a marquee for promotion of the Indoor Market and free town centre pitch licences. It was pointed out that some continental traders were reluctant to set up stalls in the town centre due to concerns about business prospects. The Portfolio Holder indicated that play centre facilities at Market Place and Park Place were likely to attract customers to the Indoor Market. It was noted that trade in the Indoor Market could be boosted by the two access points to Market Place and Park Place.

The Indoor Market team is committed to attracting a wide diversity of traders at the market. The Council still holds regular meetings with the indoor market traders regarding publicity and other issues. Members were informed that the current group of traders were of a mixed age profile. A number of senior traders had retired in recent months but a significant number of stalls were being run by young traders. Initiatives such as the 28-day licence were in place to attract new and young traders to the market.

Officers had considered the recommendation to offer staggered rents for new traders. It was concluded that the option was not viable due to the complexity and variety of trading scenarios. Businesses that may be experiencing financial problems can apply for the struggling trader rate. If trading accounts confirm feasibility issues, a trader will be offered up to six months reduced rents. The casual trader option has been rebranded as "Pop Up Stalls". This option is proving to be popular with traders. Members were informed that on average, the reduced rate was one-third cheaper than the unsubsidised rate over a six-month period. Current indoor market rents were still below rates that were payable before the introduction of rent cuts in 2011. The reduced rent option had been beneficial to traders and it had enabled some traders to grow and set up stand-alone shops in the town centre and elsewhere in the town. Members suggested that Indoor Market plans be aligned to the Co-operative Council agenda. In addition to financial considerations, the Council should also take into account the social benefits of the market. It was noted that the Indoor Market could potentially provide opportunities for small franchises and some young traders who were currently operating from private properties. The Assistant Director acknowledged that the Indoor Market would benefit from projects related to the Borough's cultural strategy and the strengthening of links with the Business and Technology Centre (BTC) and collateral business opportunities.

Members were informed that officers consult traders from different markets and settings for best practice advice. The Council continues to benefit from new advice and innovative solutions from the National Association of British Market Authorities (NABMA) and similar organisations.

It was indicated that officers are currently considering options for alternative uses of void spaces. The options included setting up art, craft demonstrations and cake stalls next to food and drink stalls. A BTC-based business support social enterprise (Wenta) will hold business advice clinics at the Indoor Market for one day a month from January 2019. A number of new traders have been secured since the last review.

Members were informed that with regard to:

- a) Long Term Recommendation 1 – The relocation of the Indoor Market is currently not considered to be a viable option. The recommendation will continue to be reviewed as plans for the town centre regeneration develop. Traders had also expressed concerns about the current location of the market. It was acknowledged that the Indoor Market was isolated from major business activities in the town centre. Some traders had suggested that the market be relocated to a more central and easily accessible location in town centre. The Assistant Director informed the Committee that the Council also had to take into consideration the views of investors on the location of the Indoor Market. The Council had introduced initiatives such display boards in the town centre and at the market and a dedicated website for the indoor market as a way of boosting trade.
- b) Long Term Recommendations 2 – An alternative location for a smaller reconfigured indoor market has not been identified or considered viable at this point. It was noted that having permanent stalls in the town centre arcade would provide direct competition to the current indoor market traders and this would make the indoor market less viable. Town centre regeneration is likely to bring new opportunities for indoor market traders. Members suggested that the recommendation be revisited after the town centre regeneration.
- c) Long Term Recommendations 3 – The Council has not considered the option to approach an independent company to administrate the indoor market on a commercial basis. It was agreed that an independent market administration company would drive hard to maximise profits and not give as much attention to social benefits of the market. The Assistant Director confirmed that the Council will review the applicability of this option in future.

It was **RESOLVED**:

- 1. That the Executive Member response be noted
- 2. That an update on the Spacemakers Indoor Market feasibility study and proposed upgrades to the Indoor Market be provided to the Economy and Environment Select Committee after an officer review of the report

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **PART II MINUTES - 12 NOVEMBER 2018**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the Environment and Economy Select Committee meeting held on 12 November 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to amending the date of the Environment and Economy

Select Committee meeting from Monday 3 October 2018 to Monday 12 November 2018.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR

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Fairlands Valley Park – A review

- Scope of review
- Background
- Current offer
- Finance
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Future opportunities
- Recommendations



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Scope



- SLC a leading leisure consultancy undertook an independent review of the strengths and weaknesses of the current offer in terms of both quality and commercial viability of the activities and services provided on site.
- Consultation with selected key stakeholders including elected members, council officers and the current site operator, Stevenage Leisure Ltd (SLL.)
- A high-level assessment of future opportunities for the site, together with relevant case studies, which explores ‘the art of the possible’ and is aligned with the wider regeneration of Stevenage.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Background

- Built in the early 1970's, Fairlands Valley Park, located in the heart of Stevenage, consists of 120 hectares of parkland stretching from the A602 in the south up to the A115. The park is bisected by Six Hills Way and linked by an underpass.
- The southern section of the park, known as the South Field, consists of a large area of natural open space providing links to three conservation areas
- The northern section, characterised by over 20 acres of open water, with 3 linked lakes and a balancing pond – the Main Lake, the Millennium Lake and the Environment Lake, Sailing Centre with meeting room, office space, workshop and changing rooms Climbing Tower and High Ropes Course
- Café
- Recently refurbished Children's Play Areas and Aqua Park, kiosk & toilets



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Background

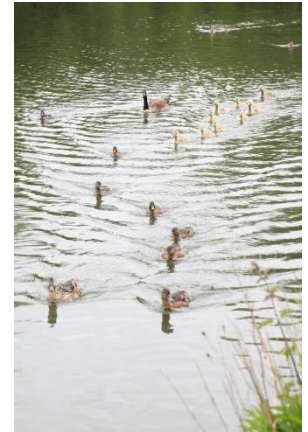
- SLL currently manage the sailing centre including the provision of all water sports activities, the high ropes course and climbing tower, aqua park and travelling show bookings on the South Field. These facilities and services form part of the Council's wider leisure management contract which runs until 2023.
- The café and kiosk (located by the aqua park and children's play area) is operated by Costello's under a lease with SLL.
- The fishery management within the park is managed by Welwyn Garden City Angling Club on behalf of the Council, who are responsible for the management and maintenance of all areas outside the responsibility of SLL.
- All other areas of the park are maintained and managed directly by the Council's Parks and Open Spaces Team
- The fragmented nature of the above arrangements has led to challenges with the operational delivery of services on site.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Current offer

- The park is much loved by local people and seen as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of Stevenage. The Council (including Members) feel the same. It serves a hugely important purpose, acting as a ‘green lung’ for the town and is perhaps the town’s/Council’s most important asset.
- There is a strong celebration of bio-diversity in parts of the park.
- The Sailing Centre focuses on water based courses and education sessions, the former is primarily used by people outside of Stevenage.
- Pay and play access at the Sailing Centre is very limited, SLL agreed to pilot a pay and play programme over the summer holiday which had very limited success.
- The Aqua Park is a highly popular free facility that attracts huge numbers of customers on fair weather days.
- The café offers an average standard of basic catering
- The website is poor and offers very little in terms of information and interactivity.
- The Sailing Centre and compound are poorly presented



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Sailing Centre Finance

	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Total Income	119,584	123,999	137,155
Total Expenditure	247,636	226,450	299,986
Operating Surplus (+) / Deficit (-)	-128,052	-102,451	-162,831

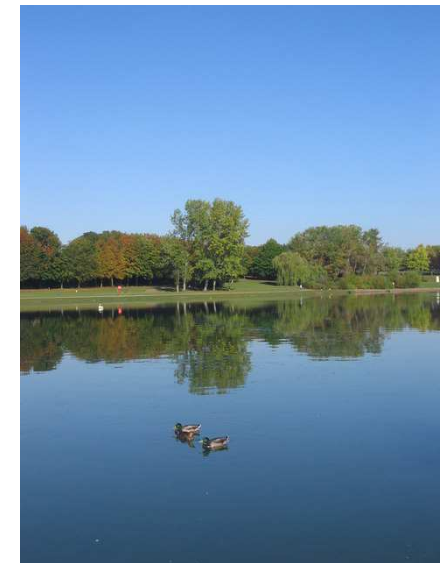


- The figures in Table 1 show an average operating deficit of c. £131K per annum.
- Approximately 50% of income is generated through sailing courses, school bookings and hire of grounds.
- Staffing is the biggest cost, comprising approximately 60% of overall expenditure. The staffing cost exceeds total income generated by an average of £54K pa over the last 3 years

Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
FVP is a well-loved and well-used community asset. It is considered to be the 'jewel in the crown' of the Council's assets and the 'green lung' of the town.	Unimaginative signage on Six Hills Way road junction.
A large site offering a combination of structured activity areas and informal, natural open space.	Site offer not obvious on entrances to site.
Central location surrounded by residential development, nursery and schools.	Approach to central café building from the rear/side. First views are of the building's roof and are uninviting.
Well connected to a network of roads, footpaths and cycle ways and served by multiple access points (11 pedestrian points).	Visually and physically cluttered high ropes/boatyard area feels like a storage yard rather than a public space.
Good provision of car parking in various locations sited close to the facilities.	No clear separation of high ropes/climbing wall and boatyard. The footpaths lead directly into this space.
Site contours add to character of site.	Café building tired and dated and does not open out onto terraces.
Tiered levels offer wide views of lake.	Uninviting information reception.
Well maintained mature landscape which forms backdrop to views.	Lack of information available on wildlife.
Attractive lakes on two levels.	Website is unimaginative.
Popular aqua park and play area with parking close by.	Leaflets available describe facilities which are not on site.
Good quality pathways.	Site signage incomplete and inconsistent.
Absence of anti-social behaviour.	Bandstand underused, appears incomplete and abandoned.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Excellent mix of facilities and services. Very well qualified staff.	Many facilities & services underused The staff prefer to provide specialist high level and costly water based courses which are staff intensive and generally are subsidised.
Park is well maintained and has Green Flag status.	Sailing Centre staff do not take ownership of issues that arise, including litter picking within the Sailing Centre and Aqua Park areas.
Park has high footfall.	There is a lack of pay and play services from the Sailing Centre.
The Aqua Park is very popular.	This managed by Pool staff on overtime which is more costly and less reactive than Sailing staff managing.
The Sailing Centre is a good information point.	The Sailing Centre is closed on Sundays (a high footfall day) and Mondays, the facility is not staffed to meet seasonal demands.
The Café offers good standard food.	Despite being a subcontractor for SLL, the Café service contract is not managed by SLL. There are not any specifications in relation to menu choices, cost of products and opening hours. External seating is poor and often tables are not cleaned.
There is good storage on site.	The compound area is untidy and unsightly and is the dominant area on the site.
The Café and Sailing Centre is a good mixed facility.	The Sailing Centre and Café are poorly presented and lack an attractive frontage.
There is plethora of wildlife and planting.	There is a lack of information regarding the wildlife and planting.
There is a dedicated website for the Sailing Centre.	The website lacks detail and is not very interactive.

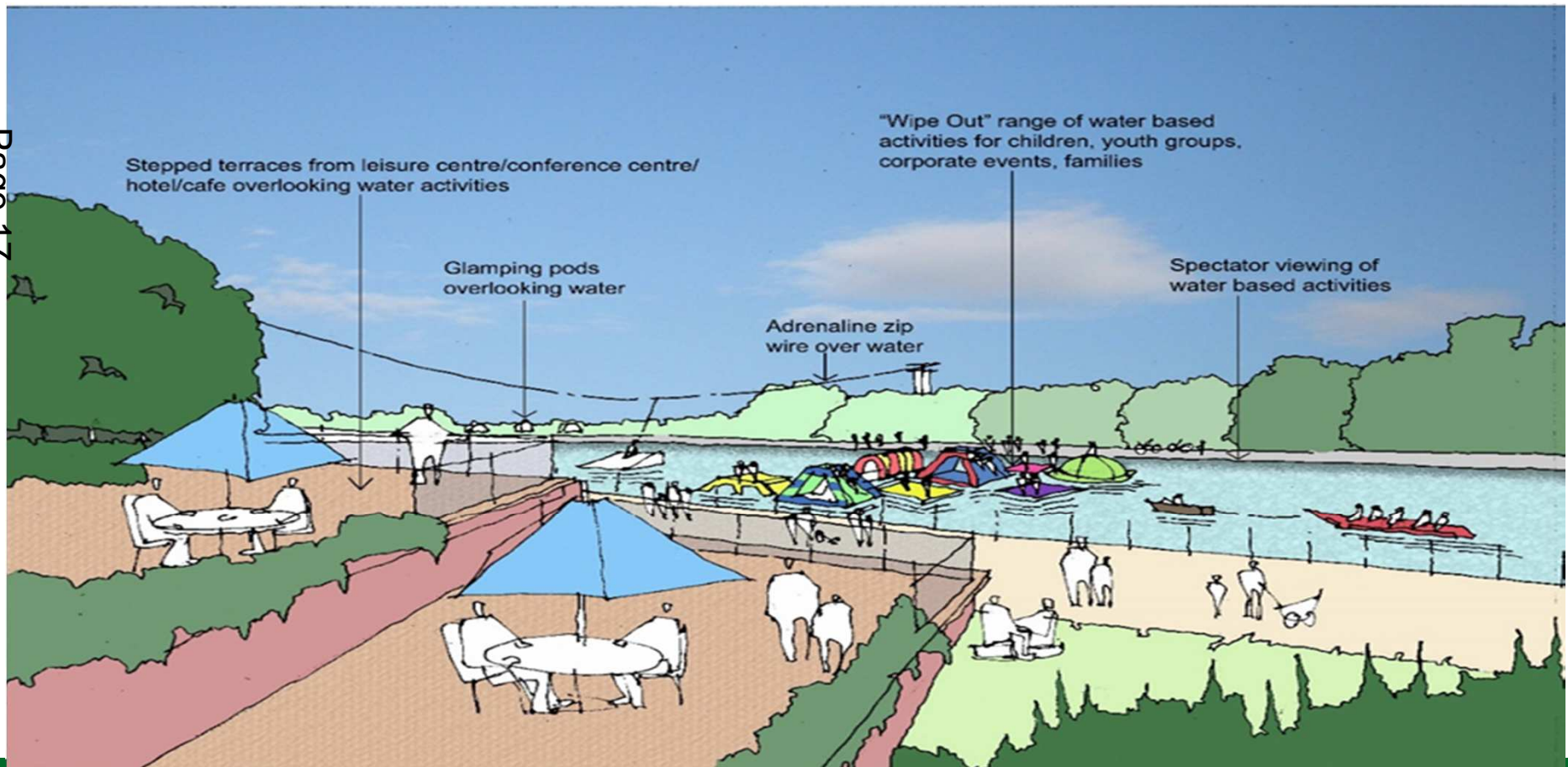


Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

“There is an overarching opportunity to explore development of a more exciting, vibrant and financially sustainable offer which redefines FVP as a ‘destination’ whilst retaining a strong ‘local’ offer and protecting the open space.” (SLC, 2018)

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Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

- There is sufficient space and suitable landscaping to create a co-ordinated outdoor activity offer that would complement the water sports activity and provide a sustainable, year round income stream for the site. This may include a more attractive high ropes facility with zip wires, climbing, archery, nature trails, team-building, woodland craft, bike and segway hire etc.
- There is sufficient space and suitable landscaping to provide additional attractions that appeal to children and families and are supported by a strong business case e.g. adventure golf.
- There is an opportunity to combine these new income generating activities with improved free to access facilities such as adventurous play areas, outdoor gym and picnic areas.
- There is an opportunity to explore development of a higher quality food and beverage offer which better meets modern expectations and complements activity on the site. This could even extend to a ‘destination’ restaurant offer which capitalises upon the attractive setting and draws visitors from a wider area.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

- There is an opportunity to explore development of additional, indoor activity such as Clip and Climb, softplay etc. to provide a year round offer and additional income streams.
- There is an opportunity to explore development of conference and/or training facilities on the site, linked with team-building activities and possibly function space.
- There is an opportunity to optimise the ecological interest of the site through better interpretation/signage linked to nature trails and woodland walks.
- To improve access point signage to the various locations around the Park
- Increasing usage and activity on the South Field
- An opportunity to promote more events linked to the cultural strategy.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Short term opportunities

- Improve the external appearance of the building frontage
- Clear up the compound and improve the appearance of the area
- Continue to work with SLL to improve the pay and play offer and change opening hours to reflect user demand in the park
- Work with Parks and Open Spaces to consider FVP as part of an overall parks strategy, linking to considerations around an overall leisure strategy for the town.
- In light of the end of the leisure contract in 2023, review the best management options for the future delivery of services with the park

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Fairlands Valley Park – A review

In Summary

- The Park is highly valued by the town
- Current leisure management contract ends 2023
- Limited non specialist use of the Sailing Centre and open water facilities
- Short term opportunities to improve the presentation of the Sailing Centre
- SBC will continue to work with SLL to improve the public offer, including “pay and play”
- Longer term SBC needs to consider the future management of the park
- In the future there are opportunities to consider improving the Sailing Centre and Café to provide a higher quality destination venue at the park



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Questions, Comments,
Suggestions?