

# Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

## 26 February 2024

### Redlands Leisure & Community Park Update

#### For Review and Consultation

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr L Beddow, Culture and Communities

**Local Councillor(s):** Cllr D Gray, Cllr H Legg, Cllr P Barrow

**Executive Director:** Jan Britton, Executive Lead for Place

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**Report Status:** Public

#### Brief Summary:

Active Dorset took over the management of Redlands Community Sports Hub in November 2022 with an ambitious plan to improve and develop the facilities, introduce a more community led operating model, and find ways for individuals and groups to be more physically active.

Dorset Council have worked closely with Active Dorset to commission building and maintenance works to ensure that the facilities are watertight, compliant, and fit for use. Whilst some of these works have taken longer than anticipated, much progress has been made to improving the facilities and user experience.

The new key holder operating model has been well embraced by individual users, and several groups and clubs have come together which has coordinated their offers and helped to make all users feel supported.

Usage has exceeded expectations and Active Dorset continue to explore ways to support people to lead a more active lifestyle.

Although the community café and soft play area were delayed due to building issues, both are now open and have been well received by local people and users. These facilities will hopefully form an integral part of the community offer and be a valuable source of income and support further investment into the site.

Prior to taking on the lease, Active Dorset forecast a revenue budget based on data provided by Weymouth College and best assumptions. Despite having to deal with some unexpected costs, and unavoidable delays in bringing new income streams on board, they have already halved the operating deficit and, subject to further improvements, are optimistic about moving into an operating surplus from 2025/6 onwards.

Active Dorset should be congratulated for creating an environment where local people and users now want to be more engaged with the site, and this is evident with the expanding number of volunteers playing an active role in the day-to-day operations.

**Recommendation:**

That the committee notes and comments on the information provided in this report.

**Reason for Recommendation:**

On 6 September 2022, Cabinet agreed that the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee be asked to undertake a review of the arrangements at Redlands Community Sports Hub at an appropriate time. Active Dorset have been operating the site since November 2022, with 16 months a realistic time frame on which to assess progress.

**1. Background**

- 1.1 In June 2021, after prior discussions with Dorset Council portfolio holders and senior officers, Weymouth College officially announced that, due to a recurring annual deficit of around £200,000, they were no longer able to run Redlands Community Sports Hub (Redlands) and would actively seek new tenants to take over the operations of the site.
- 1.2 Through an Expression of Interest exercise, the College received a single formal bid from Active Dorset, a local charity with a focus on helping people to become more active. The Active Dorset proposal was only to operate the external sports facilities and they set out ambitious and exciting plans to develop Redlands into a more inclusive community park, with a café, new 3G all-weather pitches, new play facilities and routes for walking and cycling.
- 1.3 During this period, Dorset Council and Active Dorset representatives attended several community engagement events hosted by Weymouth

College; listening to the concerns raised about the potential loss of the indoor leisure provision. Weymouth Town Council were also engaged during this time and wanted to show their support for the retention of the indoor facilities and as a result have committed to provide an annual funding grant of £35,000 for 2023/4 and 2024/5.

- 1.4 On the back of this, Active Dorset brought forward a revised proposal centred around an investment plan for improving facilities, a key holder model, where community users and volunteers take on more responsibility for the site operations and an ambition to increase usage, especially from individuals and groups who are less likely to be physically active. This approach enabled the indoor facilities to remain open for use.
- 1.5 A lease for 30 years was granted to Active Dorset in November 2022, with a 5-year break clause that can be activated by either party if the new model of operation proves not to be viable. A 30-year lease will enable Active Dorset to have security of tenure to apply for external funding.
- 1.6 Under the new lease Dorset Council are responsible for effecting any essential repairs and maintenance to the fabric of the buildings and adjacent land. Monies received from Weymouth College, in consideration for accepting their surrender, will be used to offset these costs.
- 1.7 Active Dorset provided an 8-year income and expenditure forecast and although the site is expected to make a loss in the early years, they forecast an overall positive return of £24,000 by the end of the eight-year period.

## 2. **Property Works**

- 2.1 Dorset Council commissioned a condition survey which highlighted several items that were urgent for repair or below a satisfactory standard. However, it soon became apparent that many of the highlighted items needed more urgent attention as did other previously unidentified items.
- 2.2 Making the buildings watertight was and remains a priority. Roofing repairs have improved the café rooms and major works to the main sports halls, with the installation of an over cladding solution, are currently being carried out.
- 2.3 Safety and upgrade work to lighting and electrics were completed in Summer 2023. Similarly, the wooden floor in Sports Hall 2 has been refurbished. The improved lighting in both halls and the refurbished floor have been well received by users.

- 2.4 There have also been some drainage issues that have subsequently held up works however remedial works are in hand to address this.
- 2.5 There are currently more than 40 shower units fed by gas boilers. A smaller number of electrical shower units would reduce consumption and be more cost effective. The scope of these works is currently being investigated and costed.

### **3 General Update**

- 3.1 Active Dorset took over the management of Redlands in November 2022, and following engagement with the local community, they renamed and rebranded the facilities as Redlands Leisure & Community Park.
- 3.2 A few property issues and delays have had a detrimental impact on maximising income opportunities in 2023-24. This has caused the delay in the opening of the community café and soft play area which had been identified as a key income stream for Active Dorset.
- 3.3 The new 'self-service' booking system and key code access arrangements have embedded well. Users attending sessions have adapted and are confident using online systems. The site is 'cashless' which has been uncontentious. A number of groups and clubs have come together which has coordinated their offers and helped greatly in ensuring all users are supported.
- 3.4 Financially the model of a small staff team has meant that the revenue position is already significantly closer to neutral despite the community café being delayed in opening and the 2 new 3G football pitches still to be delivered.
- 3.5 With greater club commitment and co-ordination and more individuals attending sessions, user numbers in the fourth quarter of 2022/23 were up on the same period in 2021-22 and this trend has continued into 2023-24. The growth in use by priority groups has been very positive with Pickleball a standout success.
- 3.6 Active Dorset have also sought to increase overall usage of the facilities via diversification and arrangements with the NHS and related bodies. This strategy has proved successful to date, particularly in the areas of well-being and rehabilitation.

- 3.7 The new Community Café opened on 08 January 2024, having been awarded a 5 Star Food Hygiene rating; with customers queuing to get in. The site now has over 20 volunteers, many of whom have been trained to operate the café.
- 3.8 The new soft play area has been installed in an adjacent room and this is proving a very positive addition and will no doubt add to the café's popularity.
- 3.9 Following discussions with Sports Governing bodies, all indications are that the refurbishment of the existing 3G football pitch and introduction of a new second 3G pitch, plus a new artificial cricket wicket are likely to attract grant funding. Active Dorset have commenced the application process and if a bid is successful, then construction could start in January 2025 and pitch openings around March the same year. These pitches will add significantly to revenue generation and, Active Dorset are confident that a positive financial position could be achievable from 2025-26 onwards.
- 3.10 There have also been some additional costs that have come to light since Active Dorset took on the management of the site. These include the requirement to spend more time and money on servicing and maintaining elements not previously identified, additional rates of £10,000 and an existing heating and hot water system that is inefficient and lacks flexibility. The additional cost of gas and electric has been exacerbated during a period of spiralling energy cost increases.
- 3.11 The site is already and will be significantly better than it was; watertight, welcoming and with properly lit indoor spaces. Moving forward, new 3G's pitches, an improved cricket offer, and new informal recreational opportunities will enable more users to positively engage with the site. Without doubt though the buy in by users and locals will be, and already is, the greatest driver of success. Volunteers are already engaged in helping in the café, undertaking decorating and one fantastic neighbour even walks the site with his dog each evening to make sure everything is locked properly.

#### **4 Financial Implications**

Active Dorset have experienced several property issues and challenges that have had a detrimental impact on their ability to generate income. Most notable is the delay in the opening of the community café and soft play area, which had been forecast by Active Dorset as a key source of income for 2023/4.

They have had to also incur a few unexpected costs that were previously unknown and had not been budgeted for. These include additional property rates of £10,000 and higher than anticipated energy costs.

Active Dorset had budgeted a £74,023 overspend in 2023/4 and current projections for the full 16-month period is £89,573. Dorset Council has allocated a budget of £120,431.

Given the points raised above this indicates a sound financial performance from Active Dorset. The usage trends and introduction of the community café and soft play area suggest that their budget forecasts for future years, whilst remaining challenging, are considered realistic.

## **5 Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**

The implications and policy decisions relating to this lease were considered and implemented as part of the original Cabinet decision.

## **6 Well-being and Health Implications**

As reflected by the Government and Sport England strategies and recognised by local authorities and Public Health England for some time, 'sport' is no longer delivered solely for 'sport's' sake. Increasing participation in sport and physical activity and reducing levels of inactivity are key to both local and national Government achieving outcomes in public health (physical and mental), adult social care and education.

This is further reflected in the Council Plan, where a key priority is to help create strong, healthy communities. The council's aims are to support communities to be active, to increase people's healthy life expectancy and reduce differences between areas. Leisure facilities will play a significant role in providing opportunities for all ages to lead a more physically active lifestyle.

A recent report completed by Sheffield Hallam University reviewed the social return of investment into sport in England. It concluded that for every £1 spent on sport, £1.91 of benefits are generated in health and other related outcomes.

## **7 Other Implications**

None

## **8 Risk Assessment**

8.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

## **9 Equalities Impact Assessment**

An Equality Impact Assessment was carried out as part of the 6 September Cabinet report and decision. This has been reviewed and continues to accurately reflect the opportunities for users and volunteers.

## **10 Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Equality Impact Assessment

## **11 Background Papers**

**None**

## **12 Report Sign Off**

12.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)