

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF HOUGHTON REGIS PARTNERSHIP  
COMMITTEE  
HELD AT THE COUNCIL OFFICES, PEEL STREET  
ON 27<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

Present: Town Cllrs: J Carroll, Y Farrell, D Jones, C Slough  
CBC Cllrs: C Alderman, S Goodchild, T McMahon  
CBC Sarah Hughes, Community Engagement Manager  
Officers: Ian Berry, Service Director for Assets  
HRTC Clare Evans, Town Clerk  
Officers: Amanda Samuels, Administration Officer

Co-opted members: J Anderson, D Gibbons, C Regan

Also in attendance: Cllr Burgess, Cllr Rollins

Apologies: Cllr Hamill, D Hill, R Turner, Cllr Watkins

Members of the public: 6

**1055 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Apologies were received from Cllr Hamill, D Hill, R Turner and Cllr Watkins.

**1056 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

Members were advised of the following:

- Initial exploration had begun into the feasibility of the solutions suggested previously and it was thought that making the sports hall a community asset was viable.
- While it was acknowledged that due process needed to be observed, there was some frustration that when the matter escalated the same narrative would be repeated, namely that the sports hall provision at Houstone was adequate; the algorithms did not indicate the need for a sports hall; that 4 badminton courts at the sports hall would be matched by the four at Houstone School (when in fact six courts were currently available); and that demand for sports hall usage was in decline.
- Sports England data showed sports hall usage had increased nationally.
- There was no evidence in the Leisure Strategy that Houghton Regis needed to accept a deficit in leisure provision.

- Feedback from leisure providers indicated that the data capturing mechanisms did not reflect the footfall.
- It had still not been demonstrated to the community how the provision at Houstone School would operate 52 weeks of the year or provide flexible access for walk-in members of the community
- While it was believed there had been some oversight regarding the level of sports hall provision required, this should be viewed as an opportunity for HRTC and CBC to work collaboratively to deliver a positive outcome for the community.

The Head of the Academy of Central Bedfordshire also wished to put concerns on public record.

- Indoor space was essential for the academy whose pupils included those who were vulnerable and disadvantaged. The sports hall had been used for twelve years for physical activities.
- Students would have to travel in a minibus for alternative facilities. There were pupils with additional needs, disabilities or were subject to an Educational Health Care Plan. Transporting the pupils would entail additional cost, result in time lost driving between sites and would require more staff support for the lesson and return journey.
- EHCP levels would be affected.
- When the funding was procured for the leisure centre, the Academy had written a letter of support in the belief that a sports hall would be included in the design. Support for the plans would not have been given otherwise.
- There were legal implications regarding those pupils who had been banned from Houstone School.
- The Academy would be unable to meet the physical activity levels outlined in the national curriculum.

The Head of ACB expressed interested in forming a cooperative management structure for the current hall if this was pursued as an option, and may be able to access Conditional Improvement Funding for this purpose.

ACB was one of only two institutions providing this type of education and pupils were able to gain meaningful qualifications to support them in adult life. It was also of note that no pupil had been arrested during the academic year for the last 6 years.

Members of the public were keen to highlight there was a likelihood the building would sit dormant for a significant amount of time, and it was questioned if there was a budget in place for its disposal. It was also noted that the plant and boiler rooms serviced the rest of the Kingsland campus and would, therefore, need to remain operational.

The Head of ACB confirmed they had written a letter of concern regarding the sports hall but had only received a verbal response. A copy of this letter would be forwarded to Cllr Alderman.

Cllr Goodchild had attended a Sustainable Communities OSC meeting on June 13<sup>th</sup> and read the following resolution from the meeting –

*In response the Executive Member for Health and Community Liaison confirmed that the topic had been discussed at the recent Joint Partnership Committee and welcomed engagement with the local community. Housing and population figures had been incorporated into Sports England data, so the*

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*Executive Member was keen to see the figures mentioned by the speakers in order to understand any disparity and mitigate concerns by arranging a meeting with interested parties in order to resolve it. The committee agreed that this outcome would be shared with members once it had taken place.*

It was questioned and confirmed that a meeting had been arranged but had not taken place

#### **1057 SPECIFIC DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & REQUESTS FOR DISPENSATIONS**

Cllr McMahon declared a non-pecuniary interest as a previous Chair of the Houghton Regis Leisure Centre Action Group.

#### **1058 MINUTES**

Amendments to the Minutes were requested as follows:

- Inclusion of Cllr Hamill's comments in regard to securing the sports hall for ongoing use while options were discussed.
- Page 5, Minute 1050, alter text to 'day centre may be converted to become a community space'.

**Resolved: To defer approval of the Minutes of the meeting held on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2024 until the next meeting.**

#### **1059 SPORTS HALL PROVISION IN HOUGHTON REGIS**

This meeting was arranged to enable Members to explore options for sports hall provision in Houghton Regis.

Discussions had also been held at the Houghton Regis Annual Parish Meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2024, the Town Council meetings on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024 and 14<sup>th</sup> October 2024 and at Partnership meetings on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2024 and 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2024.

Members were invited to consider the feasibility of a dedicated community sports hall in Houghton Regis and what might be involved to make that happen.

The Community Engagement Manager acknowledged that the Houghton Regis Partnership Committee was expressing the concerns of the community and proceeded to read a response from CBC addressing the points raised.

It was felt by Executive that sports hall demand could be met by the facilities at Houghton School and the Dunstable Leisure Centre. Using the school hall on a community-use basis would make the best use of facilities and of capital funding, while having both a sports hall and the school facilities would result in over provision. CBC would support the transition to the other facilities and plans for this were being formulated.

Responses to key questions:

**Was there scope for continued use of the existing sports hall?**

CBC did not see a need for this facility in addition to the school. HRTC could submit

an Expression of Interest and a robust business case to facilitate a transfer of the site to the community.

**Are there any other possible sites for a sport hall (Day Centre, Townsend Centre)?**

No other sites were being considered as it was not felt another facility was required. If there were no other service needs for the Day Centre or the Townsend Centre, an expression of interest could also be submitted for these sites, along with a robust business plan.

**Was there scope for provision or expansion at the leisure centre to include a sports hall?**

Currently no consideration was being given to expanding the new leisure centre for those reasons previously set out

**Challenges to the accuracy of the data and figures that were used**

The Leisure Facility Strategy and the Project Feasibility Study had assessed the demand for sports facilities, which included population growth forecast. Sport England guidance had suggested a four-court sports hall provision would be adequate

Access to Houstone sports hall facilities would be secured by a Community Use Agreement which would outline the hours and facilities available. Some daytime usage would be displaced due to school activities. Dual use with schools had been established for many years, however, as a way of maximising public access whilst reducing the impact on public funding.

Questions were invited from the Town Partnership Committee. The Community Engagement Manager advised that they were unlikely to have detailed answers to individual questions but they would take the questions away for discussion with Leisure colleagues and report back.

- CBC had stated consultation had taken place between educational users and CBC, but did not appear to be the case. Could this be reconciled for the Committee?
- Who had consultations been held with and when? This might help establish why had key stakeholders had been excluded.
- There had been a public consultation as part of the statutory planning process. Had there been direct consultation with education?
- The Academy had sent supporting documentation to CBC but why had there been no follow up once the bid was won?
- Would it be possible to see the specific statistics referred to by CBC? There appeared to be a significant discrepancy between the figures quoted by CBC and those brought to Town Partnership by the public.
- It was stated that the new provision would be as good as, if not better than, the existing provision. This did not appear to be the case. Did this mean that Houghton Regis had been over provisioned in the past? This was not supported by experience.
- Had existing facilities not been considered when the new centre was designed?

The Town Clerk was invited to update Members from the Town Council perspective. Members were informed as follows:

- A conversation had taken place with the Service Director for Assets focussing on what would happen following the leisure centre closure. This had clarified the process for a Community Asset Transfer and what needed to be included in the business case, highlighting also the impact on uses in the surrounding land.
- There had been discussions with CBC leisure officers who maintained that the provision by Houstone School would be adequate and existing leisure users could be accommodated in Dunstable and the new leisure centre. CBC stated that conversations had been held with existing users which had not suggested a problem with the provision offered by Houstone School, which contradicted the presentations made at a number of HRTC committee meetings. It was thought that a further meeting between members of the public and CBC leisure officers needed to be held.
- The Town Clerk had taken a tour of the Kingsland site and seen the plant room which was an integral part of a much larger space. It was hard to understand how the site could be redeveloped when the plant room was essential.
- A visit had been made to ACB which had highlighted the level of commitment to vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. CBC had perhaps not fully appreciated the importance of sports hall access in relation to the academy's curriculum.

The Committee was reminded that part of the Corporate Peer Challenge Review had been to rebuild the relationship with CBC, and this provided an ideal opportunity to work together.

For clarity, members of the public sought further information from CBC officers regarding the future plans for the site and how this would be determined by the budget-setting process.

- Had the Chiltern School formed part of the consultation process?  
The Community Engagement Manager agreed to establish which stakeholder groups were engaged in the process.
- Following the letter of support to CBC, could CBC confirm receipt of the expression of displeasure which was made when the plans revealed a sports hall would not form part of the leisure centre?
- CBC officers were questioned whether children's services were aware of the impact of the sports hall closure on the school closure?  
The Community Engagement Manager would investigate this further.
- The Community Use Agreement with the school was still not complete and the Committee queried the reasons for this the delay.  
The Community Engagement Manager advised that discussions were still ongoing but they would try to establish a likely timescale plus any additional information available.

Members were keen to know the future plans for the Kingsland quadrant which was a hub for the community. A member/officer briefing with CBC was requested to facilitate greater understanding regarding future plans for this quadrant. The Chair confirmed they would submit a request for a briefing.

It was highlighted, once again, that accurate data reflecting usage was needed as there were significant discrepancies between the figures quoted by CBC and those of community members. It was confirmed that alternative statistics had been forwarded to CBC but that these could be sent again.

When discussing outcomes, it was agreed to look at a variety of options for presentation to the Town Council. Members submitted the following suggestions:

1. At the meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> July, Cllr Hamill had suggested the matter could be called in. The Chair Confirmed that they would be happy to take the issue forward with CBC.
2. HRTC could be invited to make an expression of interest and engage in the Community Asset Transfer process. This could also be an opportunity for Co-operative management by HRTC and ACB.
3. A community group could be formed to keep the sports hall open on a voluntary basis.

A final suggestion was that a transfer could be made direct to the ACB. This would require a feasibility study, and it was agreed the Town Clerk would be a key point of contact for the ACB while the study was compiled.

The formal outcome of the discussion was read out by the Town Clerk

Proposed by: Cllr McMahon  
Seconded by: Cllr Slough  
Members voted unanimously in favour

It was agreed that calling the matter in could be discussed at the next meeting in January 2025.

**Resolved: For this committee's support to be given to HRTC for detailed consideration by HRTC to explore a way to secure the retention of the sports halls as an interim measure whilst a community asset transfer application be developed and submitted for determination by CBC**

**The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 9.15pm**

**Dated this 28<sup>th</sup> day of January 2025**

**Chairman**