
EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 17 FEBRUARY 2022

HWSP.17/22 JAMES STREET BATHS AND TURKISH HEALTH SUITE FEASIBILITY STUDY

The Chair welcomed Ms Minns, Mrs Yeates and Mr Yeates as representatives of The Friends of Carlisle Victorian Baths and Turkish Baths (The Friends) to the meeting. A presentation was delivered covering: The Friends' aim for the facility; the Vision and Need for the Health Suite in the context of heritage, community value, significance; proposals to extend the facility to include the 10m and 20m pools to ensure the long term viability by extending the offer at the site to include hydrotherapy, treatment rooms, retail space, a community launderette and a new reception; the potential of the facility in relation to tourism, economic growth and health and wellbeing; a low to medium intervention for the suite; partnership working' Borderlands funding.

The Friends suggested that the Panel consider making the following recommendations:

1. Recommend to the Executive that the Friends Group be allowed 8 - 10 months to complete an AHF funded feasibility study and business Plan (RIBA Stage 1) before the Council progresses to Community Consultation, Order of Costs and Economic Appraisal/Outline Business Case.
2. Recommend that budget be allocated to enable the Turkish Baths to continue to operate until the 1970 pool is scheduled for demolition.
3. Recommend to the Executive that Officers work with the Friends Group to explore a Community Asset Transfer and progress options for the James Street Public Baths; and provide an update to the August meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel.

In considering the presentation, Members raised the following questions and comments:

- A Member congratulated the group on securing AHF funding to conduct a feasibility study and noted that the Friends had a lot of work to do in relation to it, he asked for further detail on the timeline for that work.

Ms Minns responded that the given timeline for the feasibility study was rather conservative and it was anticipated that the work would be complete in 4-5 month, hence the proposed recommendation 3, as the Friends anticipated being able to submit an update to the Panel in August 2022. The Council needed to advise what would happen to the health suite in the interim following demolition of the 1970s pool and provide budget funding to enable the facility to remain open.

- From its reopening in July 2021 to January 2022 the health suite's had generated an income of £12,694, for the same period of time operational costs were £79,179; what kind marketing plans and costs were in place for post Covid operation of the facility?

Ms Minns noted that the operational costs had not been referenced in the report to the Panel. The Friends' presentation was not a business plan rather it was a Vision for the health suite. The current size of the facility restricted its total visitor capacity at any one time and therefore meant it had limited viability. On that basis, the Friends proposal was to expand the site with the inclusion of the 10m and 20m pools to increase the available space and services offered. The structural work required to implement those changes would be minimal. The proposed update to the Panel in August 2022 would include details relating to marketing, and it was hoped that if the proposals were agreed that the facility would provide a new visitor

attraction to the city.

- A Member asked the Leader and Deputy Chief Executive what the impact of approving the Friends' proposals would be given that a contract to demolish The Baths had already been entered into?

The Leader stated that it was well understood that the Business Case for the Sands Centre Redevelopment was predicated on the demolition of the existing pools site. The Council had no budget available to fund its continued operation, as such the Pools would close when the Sands Centre came into operation in the autumn. It was a challenge for the Council to spend 6.5 times more on operating the Turkish Baths than was generated in income. The Borderlands funding for the demolition and making good works at The Pools would only become available ownership of those facilities had transferred to that organisation. Therefore, a period of closure of the Turkish Baths would be required to enable the demolition of the 1970 pool to be carried out.

Ms Minns responded that the Officer report made clear that the transfer of GLL staff from the existing pools site to the Sands Centre would commence in summer and was expected to complete in September 2022. The demolition of The Pools was scheduled for early 2023 which meant that the Turkish Baths would be closed for a number of months. Emptying the pools in the Turkish Baths would cause them to deteriorate and leave the site open to vandalism. The closure of the Turkish Baths had not been included as an assumption in the Sands Centre Redevelopment Business Case, as such Council had not voted to approve it, nor had the public been advised of it. People had been advised that increased use would guarantee the future of the facility not funding.

The Deputy Chief Executive noted that in relation to the Borderlands Station Gateway project there remained work to do in relation to technical matters, and further clarity was needed in respect of the works required at the Turkish Baths and Victorian Health Suite. It was also unclear who would operate the facilities at the Turkish Baths going forward. GLL would not be present at the site (having moved to the Sands Centre) and it may not be inclined to do so. It was noted that the Friends envisaged a different market for the site than for the Sands, and the Deputy Chief Executive indicated that Officers would be happy to work with The Friends going forward, but considered that there were many difficult issues in relation to the demolition of the existing 1970s pool and the transition of the Turkish Baths site.

Mrs Yeates commented that the Council's plans to close the 1970 pool facility had been in place for 5 years, she expressed disappointment that the future of the Turkish Baths had not been developed earlier.

Regarding the Friends' suggested recommendation 2, the Leader gave an overview of the formal processes in relation to Local Government Reorganisation which would impact the Council's control of its budget: following the inception of a Joint Committee in mid-March / early April 2022, Carlisle City Council would cede control of its budget to the Joint Committee. From then on budgetary allocations would need to be ratified by the Joint Committee. Therefore, it was necessary to broaden any development of the Turkish Baths over a longer timescale. The Leader emphasised that he was not seeking to close the door on the project, but merely sought to highlight the landscape in which decisions would be made, he noted that monies, although a factor, would not be the principal determinant in whether the site remained open, but rather the progression of matters outlined by the Deputy Chief Executive above. In terms of the suggested recommendations 1 and 3 he considered them to be feasible.

In considering the Friends' presentation, Members raised the following questions and comments:

- A Member thanked The Friends for their presentation and noted that it presented a different offer for the site's future. In relation to increased usage figures she felt caution was needed as they were likely still impacted by Covid 19 restrictions or concerns. She expressed disappointment that the report did not recommend that the matter be referred to the Executive for a decision.

The Vice Chair advised any referral to the Executive would be considered when Members determined the Panel's recommendations.

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted an overview of the key findings of the Feasibility Study for James Street Baths and adjoining Grade II listed Turkish Health Suite that had been commissioned for Carlisle City Council by Cumbria County Council.

The study formed part of the ongoing project development work for the Borderland funded Carlisle Station Improvements project, which was being led by Cumbria County Council. The report identified a number of potentially feasible uses for the building and set out four indicative / potential development schemes for the building, with incrementally greater levels of intervention and cost.

In considering the Feasibility Study Members raised the following comments and questions:

- In relation to the Corporate Implications Property Services section of the report, a Member commented that it was not accurate to say that following valuation advice it was envisaged that the James Street assets would be disposed of; Council had indicated that it needed to identify a solution for the Turkish Baths.

The Deputy Chief Executive responded that the section of the report served to note that a valuation had been undertaken and that the site would become a non-operational asset. The default position of the Council's Asset Management Plan was to dispose of non-operational assets, the Deputy Chief Executive understood that the reference had been included on that basis, he emphasised that it did not indicate the direction of travel for Council.

- At its July 2021 meeting, Council agreed a motion to pledge that "Subject to a sustainable business plan that can show the viability of the Victorian/Edwardian health suite, the council will retain the building for the health and well-being purposes it was originally intended." Was that still the intention?

The Leader affirmed the intention that the site be retained for health and wellbeing use. It was not yet known whether such a use was feasible in the long term but it remained the preferred option.

The Member welcomed the Leader's response, he further asked: what level of engagement was taking place between Officers and The Friends in terms of asset transfer, and the level of engagement between Mott MacDonald and The Friends?

Moreover, he commented that The Friends' proposals may offer the best opportunity for the site, which he did not wish to see in circumstances similar to those of the Central Plaza. He sought assurance that the Council would seek ever closer working relationship with The Friends and other relevant partners.

The Leader acknowledged the Member's concerns regarding the Central Plaza and set out the differences between that site and the Turkish Baths in terms of ownership and Listing status. Proposals for a Community Asset Transfer seemed logical, but as yet no direct talks on the matter had taken place. The biggest challenge to taking the site forward was Local Government Reorganisation and the City Council's loss of budget sovereignty. The principal

aim for the site was for it to remain as a public facility, at the current stage of proposal development, however, that outcome could not be guaranteed, but it was one the Leader was prepared to work towards.

The Deputy Chief Executive added that in terms of working with The Friends, Mott MacDonald had not been requested to do so as part of its study which was the first stage of options development. Officers had met with The Friends a number of times, including a site visit and he reiterated his willingness for that to continue.

In response the Member commented that the securing of granting funding to conduct a Feasibility Study and develop a Business Plan, demonstrated the funder's confidence in The Friends' proposal. Regarding the Mott MacDonald Feasibility Study he made the following observations:

- In respect of the examples included in the Study of similar facilities in other areas, those which had been closed had been the most costly to return to use;
- The Turkish Baths would not be in competition with the facilities at the redeveloped Sands Centre;
- Any future pricing structure for use of the Turkish Baths was not likely to be cost prohibitive as there were a number of existing examples in the district of privately operated spa facilities.
- The transfer of the 1970s pool site to Borderlands presented an issue for the running of the Turkish Baths site, what options were open to prevent deterioration of the Turkish Baths?

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that regarding dilapidation of the site, its precise construction was not known versus the cost of refurbishment. The comments on cost of use had not meant to give the impression people would not pay more to use the facility in future, rather they related to the potential impact of use if prices were to be increased with the site remaining in its current condition: other uses would be needed to attract users paying a higher fee.

The Sands Centre redevelopment, through the closure of the 1970s pool site had been a trigger for the development of the Station Gateway project which would see works undertaken to the front and rear of the Station site including the Victorian Health Suite car park. Those works would be carried out with a phased approach, the precise timeline of which was still to be determined; the Deputy Chief Executive undertook to provide the Panel with the timeline for those works when they became available.

The Member responded that were there to be a period of months between the closure and demolition of the 1970s pool that all options to keep the Turkish Baths open, including exploring whether GLL was prepared to continue to operate the site be considered.

- Had any discussions with social prescribers to identify funding to assist The Friends taken place?

The Deputy Chief Executive noted that The Friends had been successful in securing grant funding. The Council supported such groups and the Funding Officer was able to provide advice on available pots of funding.

The Panel gave consideration to The Friends suggested recommendations and agreed to take 1 and 3 forward.

In relation to recommendation 2, a Member commented that they wished to see that taken forward also, he proposed an amended version of The Friends suggested recommendation as follows: That the consider options and potential operators for keeping the Turkish Baths open after the new Sands pool opens until such time demolition begins and identify a budget to

enable that to happen.”

The Leader noted the necessity of the recommendation on the basis that, were an appropriate option / potential operator to be found, budget may be identified at that time. It was anticipated that the level of budget required would be a de minimis sum that may be authorised via a Portfolio Holder decision.

The proposal was put to the vote, but was not accepted.

RESOLVED - 1) That the Panel had reviewed report ED.45/21 and the Mott MacDonald Feasibility Study.

2) That the Panel recommend to Executive that the Friends Group be allowed 8-10 months to complete the AHF funded feasibility study and business plan (RIBA Stage 1) before Council progresses to Community Consultation, Order of Costs and Economic Appraisal/Outline Business Case.

3) That the Panel recommend to Executive that Officers work with the Friends Group to explore a Community Asset Transfer and progress options for the James Street Public Baths; and provide an update to the August meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel.

4) That the Deputy Chief Executive circulate to the Panel, when available:

- the timeline of works for the 1970s pool demolition; and,
- details of the design and procurement stages for the Borderlands Station Gateway Project.