

Proposal for a new Meadowbank



Yet again the future of Meadowbank Stadium is on the table for discussion. This is in itself nothing new. The future of the fifty year old stadium has been in the news for the last ten years with a variety of suggestions from the development of the site for housing to full blown redevelopment of the sports facility all mooted.

Some of these plans enraged Edinburgh residents so much that petitions were signed and a campaign to save the sports centre attracted support across the city.

Although the council will not take a full decision on the specifics of Meadowbank's future next week, the tired sports centre and stadium is to feature again in talks about the ways any redevelopment might be devised.

The council first considered the future of the stadium in 2008 when they approved building a new stadium. A lot of discussion has taken place since then without significant progress being made.

In 2009 the council spent £1.45m on upgrading the reception area and changing facilities. While Edinburgh Leisure who run the sports centre do undertake maintenance, the centre is still not in the best condition, and the council believes it will reach a point where it is uneconomic to keep the centre in good enough repair to keep it open. Meadowbank was previously used as a venue for election counts but this was recently moved to Ingliston.

Now the architects behind the newest proposals will use all the land between the existing stadium and the road by bringing the stadium right up to the pavement. By using glass along the frontage they hope to make it a livelier more welcoming

building for users and passers-by. They also hope that the streetscape would be enhanced with a lively civic space.

This time the council believe that in the model they would like to propose there is a funding gap of anywhere between £10m and £20m. For that reason alone any decision on the future of Meadowbank will have to await the budget discussions on 12 February before any final plans are agreed.

Since 2013 £0.325m has been spent on deciding what to do with this important sports venue:

February 2013 – £60,000 on options appraisal

August 2013 – Deloittes and Reiach and Hall appointed to conduct study

December 2013 – Culture and Sport referred the options appraisal to Council

February 2014 – £0.200m allocated to feasibility study

July 2014 – Design team appointed to deliver feasibility study

Meadowbank has been a massive success over the years as the main venue for two Commonwealth Games held in the capital and many other sporting fixtures, but although it still attracts over half a million users each year, it is supported financially by the council who have to pay to keep it open. Until 2013 the council paid £0.400m to subsidise Meadowbank although that sum has fallen to £0.250m since the 3G pitch opened and James Gillespie's High School have used the sports facilities. That school will have its own sports areas soon as part of its own redevelopment so the amount of subsidy could increase again. The council would immediately £1m a year if the facility is closed for demolition and rebuilding.

The current plan is to re-provision the whole sports centre by

2018 at a price of around £43m. Although in the past the council was attacked for thinking the best plan was to sell off the whole site for housing, there are still elements of that included as 10 acres of the land to the east could be sold in three lots for housing to pay for the new stadium. This would help the council address the housing needs which they have including affordable housing for social rent or sale.

Yet another student housing development could be part of the new scheme with plans for a 273 bed student accommodation block which the council believes would generate the best financial return. The council have taken advice from Deloitte on the costings associated with the scheme.

The way that the council hopes to finance the new stadium is by getting funding from SportScotland who may offer a grant of up to £7m, the savings from closing the facility which would be ploughed into the development plans, some prudential borrowing and the sale of some of the land which is considered surplus. Alternative arrangements across the other Edinburgh Leisure venues would have to be made for all the sports clubs who use the centre.

The arms length company Edinburgh Leisure runs 15 gyms and over 700 fitness classes per week although the company reported a £232,000 funding gap last year to 31 March 2014. The council allocates £9m to Edinburgh Leisure to deliver its core services. Due to the strains on council funding the level of this funding may be under threat although all will become clear during the budget discussions next month. The council has stated that it strives to maintain all front line services as far as possible and Edinburgh Leisure is taking steps to become more efficient along with all other core council departments.

The council will be asked to take a decision to borrow the difference, but they are looking at ways of minimising the

funding gap as far as possible. They are also keeping an open mind on all funding possibilities which might include a commercial partner.

The whole facility will be modernised and will include outdoor athletics track with seating for 500, an indoor 60m six lane athletics track with jumps, an outdoor throws area, a 3G synthetic sports pitch or grass pitch in the centre of the outdoor athletics track for football or other sports, an additional 3G sports pitch, an eight court badminton sports hall with 500 permanent seats and bleachers, a four court badminton sports hall with 500 permanent seats and a gymnastics hall, gym, studios, changing facilities, cafe and meeting rooms.

At present the centre falls short of the requirements set out by sports bodies for those taking part in the sport and for spectators. Lighting levels and run-off areas on courts need to be improved for safety reasons. The whole stadium is now considered to be one of the worst facilities in Scotland.

If approved the new centre would be ready to open to the public in 2018. Unless a decision is made to redevelop the whole site then it is likely that the council will be forced to phase plans to close the stadium.

Ground survey works and a development brief costing £0.1m may be agreed at next week's Corporate Policy meeting which would help to identify more clearly what costs would be involved in the project, and any confirmed funding requirements will then be agreed in the budget discussions next month.

The council feel that they must make this project fit in with the other budget pressures it already faces.

In recent years the council spent £37m to redevelop the Royal Commonwealth Pool which was also closed during the renovation works. The costs of running the pool now are much less than

they were before, and the council also saved money by closing the pool for a time. The pool was used for the diving competitions during last year's Commonwealth Games. The new stadium would be an energy efficient building and energy costs should therefore be lower.

Another key point is that any new design must be kept a suitable distance away from the 11 Wheatley Elms on Wishaw Terrace and the 10 on London Road which are all considered important trees in the city.

Councillor Richard Lewis Culture and Sport Convener for the City of Edinburgh Council said: "For almost 50 years now, Meadowbank has nurtured sporting participation at all levels – from those taking part for recreational and health benefits to those training for success and medals on a Scottish and international stage. It feels right that after Scotland's successful Commonwealth Games in 2014 we kick off 2015 by considering the future of the country's very first Games venue.

"The feasibility study requested by the council in February 2014 has now been completed and before progressing further, a decision from Council is required as to whether it can meet the funding shortfall projected."

June Peebles, Interim Chief Executive of Edinburgh Leisure said: Meadowbank is part of Edinburgh's sporting heritage and continues to attract thousands of customers participating in a wide range of physical activities through its doors each week.

"Edinburgh Leisure is therefore delighted to be working with the council on this exciting project which could create a new Meadowbank for the city creating an inspiring and welcoming venue that supports even more people to get active, stay active and achieve more."

The Council's Corporate Policy and Strategy Committee meets on 20 January 2015 at 10:00am at the City Chambers. The meeting

is open to the public.