

## **Rother District Council**

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	4 November 2019
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	Land at Little Common Recreation Ground

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### **Recommendation:** It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) the proposed disposal by lease of Pitch 4 at Little Common Recreation Ground, shown at Appendix A, be advertised on two consecutive weeks as required by Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972; and
  - 2) subject to completion of this process, a lease be granted to Little Common Football Club for a term of eight years at £500 per annum rent to tie in with the expiry of the pavilion lease and other terms and conditions to the satisfaction of the Executive Director.
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**Head of Service: Joe Powell**

**Lead Cabinet Member: Councillor Brewerton**

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### **Introduction**

1. Football grounds are required to meet certain criteria set by the Football Association (FA) in order to allow teams to participate in different levels of football league; the higher the league, the more stringent the ground grading requirements.
2. Little Common Football Club (LCFC) has approached Council officers and Members asking that ground grading work is undertaken at Pitch 4 at Little Common Recreation Ground. The FA has indicated to LCFC that in order for them to continue to play at the ground – in the league to which they were recently promoted – they must erect a fence around Pitch 4 and increase the spectator stand to accommodate another one hundred spectators. LCFC intend to meet the cost of any works themselves. An aerial view of Pitch 4 can be found at Appendix A and an example of the type of fencing to be used can be found at Appendix B.
3. The first team currently has to play home games at the ground of Eastbourne United (EU) as this is the only local venue that has the capacity to enable LCFC to play on an FA approved enclosed pitch. EU has given notice that LCFC will not be able to continue playing at their ground after the current 2019/20 football season. LCFC need to notify the League by the 31 March 2019 whether or not they will have an approved ground on which they can continue to complete in the League.
4. The Council recognises the importance and value of its local sport clubs and has been working closely with LCFC to develop the recommendation in this report. The positive impact LCFC has on the local community, particularly in

the social value it provides through its youth teams should be noted. In addition, the sense of civic pride and community cohesion which is achieved through local sporting successes should not be overlooked.

5. There have been a number of ground grading improvements undertaken at Little Common Recreation Ground over the years that have enabled LCFC to progress to higher leagues and continue to play in Little Common. It is felt by the Council that to erect fencing around the pitch will give the impression to the public of a loss of open space.
6. The club currently runs three senior teams and fourteen youth teams providing training and matches for over 250 people on a weekly basis. It is anticipated that that there will be a loss of income to the Council of approximately £3,000 of pitch fees, working on the basis of two senior teams and one youth team using Pitch 4, however there would be a saving of £2,500 per annum made from the Council not having to maintain the football pitch.

### **Disposal of Public Open Space**

7. It should be highlighted that while LCFC propose to keep the pitch accessible to the public by including gates in the fencing, as shown at Appendix A, the recommendation in this report will lead to a loss of Pitch 4 as public open space. Residents will be able to raise objections as part of the process of disposal of the land through Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972. The Council will also be obliged to advertise in the local paper (for a period of two weeks) the intention to dispose of the land as public open space. If objections are received, these would then need to be reported back to Cabinet so that a final decision on disposal of the land can be made.
8. It is recommended to grant LCFC an eight year lease at £500 per annum with the Club taking on responsibility for all grounds maintenance. This arrangement represents a saving to the Council of £2,500 per annum in maintenance fees; however, there will be a loss of income to the Council of approximately £3,000 of pitch fees. The £500 annual cost of the lease is designed to protect the Council from any loss of income over the eight year lease period. The lease term allows a review in line with the pavilion lease, which expires in 2027.

### **Planning Permission**

9. The proposal to erect fencing would require LCFC to apply for planning permission as would the intention to increase the spectator stand. Examples of the types of FA approved fencing are attached at Appendix B. LCFC will meet all costs of purchasing and installing the fencing as well as works to increase the spectator stand.
10. At the same time as applying for planning permission LCFC will be required to apply for a route diversion for a public footpath. Appendix C shows public footpath "48b" that cuts across Pitch 4 on the route C-D-E. The East Sussex County Council Rights of Way Officer has advised that he sees no real likelihood of reasoned objections to a diversion of the path to E –F.

## **Previous Ground Grading Approvals**

11. Set out below are the previous ground grading improvements that LCFC has undertaken and funded, with the relevant planning and Cabinet approvals:
- 2003 – new pavilion built at the recreation ground, funded by Sport England, Rother DC and the Clubs.
  - 2005 – pitch side barriers erected.
  - 2007 – hard surfaced footpath along the northwest pitch boundary, provision of floodlights, extension of two dugouts, extension and the conversion of the grandstand to seating.
  - 2010 – to extend the pitch side footpath to three sides of Pitch 4 and to extend the spectator stand.

## **Conclusion**

15. At present LCFC is enjoying the most successful period in their history and is competing at their highest ever level including participation in the FA Cup and FA Vase. Officers have attempted, without success, to find an alternative compromise with the FA's ground grading panel.
16. Members are invited to consider the benefits of granting a lease to LCFC. The disposal process will establish the scale of any objection from residents to the loss of public open space while also providing a route for the club to make the necessary improvements it needs to make in order to continue to play matches in the local area.

Malcom Johnston  
Executive Director

## **Risk Assessment Statement**

There is a risk that some residents will not wish to lose the open space at Pitch 4; however, objections can be raised through the land disposal process and these would then need to be reported back to Cabinet so that a final decision on disposal of the land can be made.

Officers have been contacted by the Treasurer of the Pavilion's Management Committee to explain that during the last financial year, the Club's Pavilion made a loss mainly because the football club is no longer using the facilities on a Saturday afternoon and there is a risk that the pavilion could be handed back to the Council if further losses are made.

There is also a risk that LCFC is forced to relocate outside of Little Common permanently and the community benefits lost. There would also be a loss of pitch income to the Council.

Plan showing boundary of fencing around the pitch and location of gates



Examples of the types of Football Association approved fencing:

Wooden hit and miss panel fencing



V Mesh fencing



Public footpaths at Little Common recreation ground

