Executive – 24th February 2009

BOSTON MANOR SPORTING & HERITAGE REGENERATION AREA

Report by: Cllr. Peter Thompson – Leader

Summary

This report alerts the Executive to discussions which are now under way with various organisations about the future of the Council’s Boston Manor House and Park and the adjoining playing fields in the ownership of the London Playing Fields Foundation (LPFF).

The aim of these talks is to find solutions to some, and preferably all, of a number of leisure, sporting and heritage issues. These include:

- The need to restore and find a viable future use for Boston Manor House, a Grade 1 listed building, and one of a number of Council properties on English Heritage’s Heritage at Risk Register.
- A complementary desire to restore the immediate grounds of the House as part of a wider enhancement of Boston Manor Park in which it sits.
- The desire to improve the leisure and sporting facilities available in the Park.
- The desire to improve the sporting facilities which are also on offer in the adjoining playing fields which are run by the LPFF and thereby achieve a combined sporting “hub”.

In the past there have been exploratory discussions with officers from a number of relevant heritage and sporting organisations and also with GSK, whose headquarters adjoin the site to the south. The aim of these talks has been to explore the potential for some form of public, private and voluntary sector partnership.

At the same time, there have been continuing discussions about a potential landmark ‘Gateway’ structure which might be constructed on the LPFF playing fields either side of the M4 motorway. The aim here would be to mark and celebrate the visitor’s entry into the heart of Hounslow / London and, at the same time, to generate some rental income for the LPFF to be used to support its sports plans.

GSK’s involvement in these discussions also raises questions concerning car parking as the company is seeking to fully utilise its headquarters and GSK has indicated that current car parking levels are seen as inhibiting this.

1. Recommendations
1.1 That the Executive endorse the principle of these various projects and note the programme of work set out in section 6 which will need to be undertaken in the coming months with potential partners.

2. Background

**Boston Manor House**

2.1 Boston Manor House, which is in Council ownership, is an outstanding example of a Jacobean Manor House dating from 1622 with alterations and wing extensions up until the nineteenth century. It is a Grade 1 listed building which is rightly regarded as an architectural gem of national significance.

2.2 Boston Manor House has an interesting history, having been occupied for more than 300 years by the Clitheroe family, and possesses a remarkable range of original features including richly decorated plaster ceilings and other surviving décor and interior design from the 17th century.

2.3 Unfortunately, the building has featured on the English Heritage National Register of Buildings at Risk since 2001 and was one of ten cases studies in their 2004 study "Mansions at Risk in Public Parks in London". English Heritage has now formally written to the Council seeking assurances that the Council will address its heritage responsibilities and undertake essential repairs and renovations.

2.4 An initial building conditions survey was carried out by Richard Griffiths Architects during 2007, funded generously by GSK. This noted the House’s structural problems, the lack of sufficient ongoing maintenance and its continuing vulnerability to vandalism. The report sets out a prioritised list of the repair works.

2.5 Though English Heritage is mindful of the Council’s lack of capital funds available for restoration, it has been critical of what it sees as the lack of any real purpose or vision for the House. The need now is to explore the options for its long term use and to identify a viable and sustainable future for it. A feasibility study needs to be undertaken, a detailed conservation statement drawn up and a business plan developed.
Boston Manor Park

3.1 Boston Manor House is set within an attractive parkland which in recent years has been prioritised in terms of horticultural maintenance and landscape design, and has been strongly supported by an effective Friends of Boston Manor Park, which has been successful in fundraising for improvements.

3.2 Boston Manor Park obtained a Green Flag Award (an externally accredited national award for quality of open space) for the first time in 2005, and has retained this in each annual judging.

3.3 In 2005 GSK funded a specialist study of the historic landscape of the Park by Colson Stone which confirmed its continuing value and interest, despite the incursion of the M4 motorway during the 1960s. The Park has a number of carefully landscaped features including attractive lawns, a lake and many mature trees including some stunning examples of Cedar of Lebanon.

3.4 Within the park there have been a number of disused and rundown ancillary buildings which have now been successfully improved, with the opening of a park café through the hard work of the Friends and the construction of a new, modern and well-used children’s play area alongside renovated tennis courts and a multi-use games area.

3.5 The park is well-used and much loved by both local residents and other visitors, and in recent years there have been a considerable amount of community effort to generate improvements in the park, raising money for tree planting and horticultural works, engaging local residents in clean up days and campaigns to remove litter and improve the appearance of the park. The Brentford Festival has been re-launched and successfully held using both the Park and the House over the last three years.

3.6 Adjacent to the more structured park is an area of playing fields and sports pitches in the Council’s control and management, which due to lack of investment have become run down and in need of regeneration.

3.7 Responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Park has now, of course, passed to John Laing and their sub-contractor, Continental Landscapes. They are currently responsible for:

- Providing general grounds maintenance, statutory testing and a reactive maintenance service for both Park and House
- Keeping the House open to the public at the advertised times, currently free of charge
- Maintaining the Green Flag status of the Park
- Supporting the Friends Group including the delivery of the Brentford Festival each September
- Hosting community events within the House, including a fund raising Xmas Quiz by the Friends of Boston Manor
• Dealing with enquiries for access to the property when closed / out of hours (there is particular interest from film companies associated with paranormal activities)
• Undertaking an audit of the House collection by a qualified Archivist as part of a wider Heritage service project
• Reviewing the electrical supply to upgrade the existing supply to the café area and changing rooms with capacity to introduce further lighting/CCTV within the park at a later stage

3.8 One issue they are seeking to address with the Friends is the operation of the public car park at the southern end of the Park. Intended for park visitors, this suffers from uncontrolled commuter parking by office staff based at GSK and elsewhere. The opening of the Thames Valley University campus nearby has exacerbated these difficulties. A scheme to introduce pay and display arrangements in the car park, so as to deter long term commuter parking, is in development with s.106 funding allocated by the Isleworth and Brentford Area Committee.

London Playing Fields Foundation

4.1 Adjacent to the Boston Manor Park to the north is a large area of playing fields in the ownership of the London Playing Fields Foundation, a registered charity and provider of sports pitches and playing fields in a number of areas of London since the start of the century. These extensive pitches are well used by local sporting groups and clubs, and particularly by schools.

4.2 However, the sports pavilion, which provides the changing rooms, toilets and other support facilities for these pitches, is well over 25 years old, in a very poor state of repair and quite clearly needs upgrading and replacing. In particular, the inadequate toilet facilities are proving a major disincentive to use by girls and women, despite a growing demand for female football, rugby and cricket. The pavilion is also poorly sited, right next to the M4, at the furthest point from all pedestrian and vehicle access, and lacks its own parking facilities.

4.3 Given the extensive pace of urban and residential development in Brentford, which is seeing a considerable growth of population and significantly increased housing densities, there is a growing need for more leisure and sporting facilities and improvements to the quality and accessibility of those that exist. The Council has committed itself to working in partnership to help achieve this in the Brentford Area Action Plan which was adopted by Borough Council in January.

4.4 The LPFF has come forward with proposals to relocate and replace their currently inadequate sports pavilion with a new sports building which might also be developed in conjunction with other sports bodies. One such might be Middlesex Cricket Club which has itself expressed interest in an indoor cricket college at Boston Manor. Three alternative locations have been considered for this new combined sports facility. All of these are further south than the existing pavilion. This would improve access to the new facility, but would also require some form of land acquisition or swap with the Council. The site of the present pavilion would return to open space.
4.5 To help fund these ambitions, the LPFF has previously approached the Council with proposals for a ‘Gateway’ structure on their land which would mark the entry to and exit from London at the site where the M4 rises onto its elevated section and first offers the vista of a clearly urban landscape including buildings such as the GSK Headquarters, the new Thames Valley University campus development and the new Sky studios currently under construction. The Executive has previously supported the principle of such a structure in February 2007 and discussions have been had with J C DeCaux about their possible involvement in this project. The difficulty here has been in identifying a design which would be of sufficient landmark quality and provide a significant rental income to the LPFF without the need for a level of advertising inappropriate on a site at a motorway’s edge and on land designated as metropolitan open land. These discussions are ongoing and may result in future planning applications to the Council. Determination of any application will of course be a matter for the Isleworth and Brentford Area Planning Committee and will also need to overcome any objections from the Highways Agency on road safety grounds.

GSK

5.1 GSK have shown considerable interest on each of these issues and have developed their own ideas for a package of measures which could assist in the repair, restoration and enhancement of Boston Manor House and Park, whilst at the same time addressing GSK’s own pressing needs. In particular the company is concerned that the car parking restraints at GSK House are preventing the fullest use of their headquarters.

5.2 GSK have been at the forefront of green travel planning in recent years and have supported a range of initiatives to encourage staff to travel to Brentford by public transport, cycle and other sustainable means. The company has also contributed significant s.106 sums over the years to fund bus, rail and other improvements. However, the company believes that all of the “easy wins” have now been taken in encouraging staff to switch travel modes and they believe they need access to nearly 600 more car parking places if they are to occupy GSK House to its fullest potential.

5.3 With this in mind, GSK have explored the potential to establish a new car parking area within Boston Manor Park which would serve the future parking needs of both the company and the wider public who would hopefully be drawn to the Park for events, to a restored Boston Manor House and to the new sporting facilities described above.

5.4 GSK has commissioned a master planning study which indicates how this might be achieved. The proposal would be to utilise the area beneath the elevated section of the M4 immediately north of GSK House to set out a new car park. Access to this area during working hours during the working week would be for GSK staff only and would generally be directly from GSK House. At other times the space could be used by the general public and be reached via the current Boston Manor Road entrance and the existing public car park.

5.5 If this was achievable, GSK have indicated that they would be able to justify a capital contribution to the projects referred to in this report.
5.6 However, the planning difficulties with this proposal should not be underestimated. Parking at GSK House, though less than the company wishes, already comfortably exceeds the maximum standards set out for new development in both Hounslow’s UDP and the London Plan. Moreover, the Council granted permission for an additional 179 spaces in 2004 expressly on the understanding that future improvements to public transport within the 50 minute catchment area would enable the company to make car parking reductions, not increases, over time.

5.7 Additional parking within Boston Manor would also raise concern as to its compatibility with the Park’s status as metropolitan open land, as to its possible effect on the historic setting of the House and grounds and on the public enjoyment of these assets. However, it must be conceded that the proposed location, immediately below the M4, is undoubtedly the least sensitive aspect of the Park at present.

5.8 The Executive will be aware that there are other relevant considerations to weigh up in responding to this proposal. As the economy enters a significant recession, there is an understandable desire to retain and, if possible, boost local employment opportunities and to protect the vitality of the Great West Road as a major employment centre. GSK is perhaps now the most prominent expression of the “golden mile” and there is understandable concern that its vitality as a business location should not be compromised.

5.9 Equally, the recession and the likely squeeze on public funds in coming years reduces the prospect of other sources of funding becoming available to assist with the regeneration at Boston Manor. Certainly, there is no immediate prospect of significant new development projects coming forward which could make a sizeable s.106 contribution to these projects. In this context, GSK’s parking proposals might be seen as a necessary “enabling” development to bring out about heritage and sporting aims that are unachievable by other means.

5.10 The Executive will appreciate that any decision about the acceptability of GSK’s parking plans will be made not by itself but by the Sustainable Development Committee, in association with the Mayor of London. Given the scale of the parking sought, any potential planning decision will need the Mayor’s support. In theory the Mayor could direct refusal of a GSK application even if supported by this Council or alternatively call in and approve an application opposed locally.

5.11 Nevertheless, it is appropriate for the Executive to offer comment and offer its “in principle” support at this stage, whilst understanding that this cannot bind the Council as planning authority.

Taking these issues forward

6.1 Each of the projects described above – the restoration and re-use of Boston Manor, the enhancement of the Park and the creation of new sports facilities – raise major challenges, but also exciting opportunities.
6.2 Funding, especially at a time of recession, is a particular challenge and it needs to be recalled that the Council is simultaneously seeking a viable solution for the two mansions at Gunnersbury Park.

6.3 There is also the challenge of establishing a sufficient consensus around these proposals and the relative priority to be attached to each in the overall regeneration programme. There would also need to be agreement about an acceptable phasing of these different elements. GSK are understandably anxious for an early decision and implementation on its parking proposals, but the ultimate solution for the future of Boston Manor House or a new LPFF sports facility could still be some way off.

6.4 Subject to the views of the Executive, it is proposed to take this report for discussion to the Isleworth and Brentford Area Committee and then to establish a project group drawn from all of the stakeholders to progress these ideas under the direction of the Leader, the Lead Member for Leisure and the Council’s Heritage Champion.

6.5 English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Sport England are all key stakeholders in this project. All have been encouraging progress at Boston Manor and will be expecting to see future grant applications from the Council and its partners.

7. Comment of Director of Finance

7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report at this stage. However, as the programme of work develops, the Council may be expected to make significant financial contributions to these projects as it is unlikely, for example, that all grant applications will be fully funded by the key stakeholders. Any future financial commitment will need to be considered at the appropriate time and the necessary funding identified to meet any commitment agreed.

8. Comment of Director of Legal Services

8.1 The Director of Legal Services comments that at this stage there are no specific legal concerns. However, members must be mindful of the need to ensure that all appropriate consultation is undertaken and that any scheme to be taken forward meets the Council’s statutory and other duties.

Background Papers:
Executive report on the establishment of a ‘Gateway to London’ – Feb 2007

This report has been or is due to be considered by:
CMT 5th February 2009
Executive 24th February 2009

This report is relevant to the following wards/areas:

All