

LEISURE, PARKS & WASTE MANAGEMENT (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

16 JULY 2020

PRESENT:

Councillors Matthews (Chairman), Westwood (Vice-Chair), Silvester-Hall (Vice-Chair), Baker, Barnett, Banevicius L Ennis, Ray, Salter, Warfield, Westwood and M Wilcox.

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Cox, E. Little and J.Granger as Ward Councillor attended the meeting).

26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Tapper.

27 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Councillor Baker declared a personal interest in item 3 as her husband was a user of the cardio rehab facility at Friary Grange Leisure Centre.

28 RE-OPENING OF LEISURE CENTRES

The Committee received a report on the planned re-opening of the leisure centres in the district following the government mandated closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was reported that Leisure Centres had developed a model of operating that meant almost all their costs were met by the generated income, however with closure, all this income ceased. It was also reported that the Council was providing financial support to Freedom Leisure during closedown and for an initial period following re-opening. To manage these costs, Burntwood Leisure Centre (BLC) would re-open initially, with Friary Grange Leisure Centre (FGLC) remaining furloughed to the end of October 2020. It was reported that this phased re-opening would help monitor the confidence of users in returning to use facilities as well as give valuable lessons in operating in a difference climate.

It was reported that the opening of BLC first would cause inconvenience to users of FGLC but Officers would be working with those people and clubs to accommodate them as much as possible in the interim.

The longer term picture of how to re-establish leisure centres would become clearer in coming months and it was noted that scenarios had been modelled and were in the report and that any decision would be driven by how matters unfold.

Councillor Ray expressed some disappointment in the decision not to open FGLC at the outset as it meant a loss in leisure facilities for Lichfield City residents and there was concern that it raised the option to close the centre although it was believed this matter had been dealt with previously with a commitment made by the Council to keep it open.

It was requested that a further option of a partial re-opening be explored and a report on this be presented to the committee. It was requested that lane swimming be considered to aid the clubs in the area and help receive an income. It was also requested that opening the swimming pool be considered as it could help families undertake affordable activities during the summer holidays. There was concern some people may not be able to get to BLC.

There was also concern that assumptions had been made how people will use and by leisure facilities in the longer term when it was too soon to fully understand what views will be. It was felt that affordable leisure was key in tackling key society challenges like obesity, aging population and those living with long term chronic conditions.

Regarding the financial pressures, it was expressed that it should not be the only aspect to consider when re-opening the centres but also the views and needs of residents. It was felt that the difference was small between opening both and the phased approach.

In response to the points raised, it was reported that due to the layout of FGLC, and the need to observe social distancing rules, a partial re-opening could only occur for the swimming pool but this would still be difficult and although the swimming clubs were big users of the facility, they only account for 5%-10% of the budgeted income and it was noted that swimming lessons wouldn't begin until later in the year. It was reported that currently only lane swimming could commence and so there would not be any fun sessions as what would have been offered ordinarily. It was recognised that swimming was a key activity for health and wellbeing and this was why there was a desire to bring in the pool facilities at BLC and working with neighbouring facilities to help the swimming clubs find temporary alternative locations whilst there is the pause in opening FGLC. It was reported that there were still many unknowns including any financial help from government or takeup on usage. It was also reported that if income could not be achieved at FGLC, the now marginal difference in cost would be much worse and so managing risk was a big factor. It was also reported that there was currently opportunity to move furloughed FGLC staff to BLC.

When asked if there was risk to the contract with Freedom as it stated to operate both leisure centres, it was noted that as it was a mandated closure were considered a qualifying change in law and although this did not mean the contract was null and void, the Council needed to work with Freedom to find solutions.

Committee Members had further concerns on projected usage and it was asked if there had been any specific consideration from either current membership in entirety not just clubs. Outdoor gyms was also asked about and if there was any information on their takeup and if that could affect the centres. It was reported that Freedom had done some research regarding members on a sampling basis along with industry wide research which was showing a 60-70% return from an income perspective in the first 12 months with half that keen to return as soon as able. It was noted that stated intentions may be very different to what actually takes place.

Clarity was sought on the capacity and readiness of the opening of BLC as it was stated that it had seen 11.5k visitors a month and whether they could take any more from FGLC safely. There was concern in using BLC as a test and it was asked if there were plans to step in if required. It was reported that number at BLC would be managed by only using a pre-booking system for facilities and no drop-in option and this would also support track and trace. It was also noted that there would be a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system with Freedom to look at the physical operation as well as financials with meetings at least once a week to consider these matters.

It was asked if the refurb of FGLC could be completed quicker if the centre was closed and it was reported that a key aspect of the tender specification was that works could be done on a live site so there was no rush to start work and some of the scenarios did include the works not taking place. When asked for shorter term costs and not for the life of the Freedom contract, it was agreed to send these to the Committee.

Outdoor gyms were discussed and it was noted that more had been added and were being well used and there were opportunity to move some of the rehab facilities to these open air spaces which were safer from a covid-19 point of view. It was also reported that a programme was being developed to assist people using the gyms.

It was reported that it was essential that all reopening was done in a safe and visibly safe manner and it was reported that Freedom had been working hard to do this and was sharing all plans with the Council.

When asked about the income guarantee from the government, it was confirmed that no details of this scheme had been received. However there was no confirmation whether at arms length operators would be included.

It was requested that communication with residents and users remain open.

Councillor Ray felt that as a survey of the membership at FGLC had not been fully undertaken and this data analysed, he formally moved that an extra recommendation be added to request that partial re-opening of FGLC be considered by Officers and the Cabinet member and the result of this be reported back to the Committee as soon as possible. This was seconded by Councillor Westwood and agreed by the Committee.

Councillor Ray wished to have it recorded that he was not in agreement with the recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 of the report.

- RESOLVED:
- (1) That the actions taken to date to support the continued provision of indoor leisure services be endorsed;
 - (2) That the contents of the report be noted;
 - (3) That the Committee receive a further report in the autumn to update on the position of the leisure centres and wider context;
 - (4) That a partial re-opening of Friary Grange Leisure Centre be investigated and conclusions reported back as soon as possible.

(The Meeting closed at 7.20 pm)

CHAIRMAN