

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

13 FEBRUARY 2017

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:

Arthur Hill Pool

When the Council voted to close Arthur Hill Pool in October 2016 you told the public that it was necessary to close the pool immediately in order to save £30,000 in the current financial year. Have any unexpected costs subsequently arisen that the Council is facing as a result of closing Arthur Hill Pool, and are you confident of making the anticipated savings of £30,000 this year?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your question Mr Lightfoot. Firstly, you are incorrect in stating that the Council told the public it had to close the pool immediately in order to save £30,000 in the current financial year - although this was reported as the anticipated in-year financial consequence of closing the pool in December. The report to Council was very clear on the rationale for closing the pool which was summarised very succinctly in the report's introductory paragraphs:

'This report outlines a budget savings proposal to close Arthur Hill Pool to enable full-year revenue savings in 2017/18 and future years of £120k per annum, remove significant liabilities regarding the short-term investment of approximately £700k needed to upgrade the facility and also to reduce ongoing property maintenance costs.'

The reasons for expediting the closure were rather the parlous condition of the pool and the desirability of a planned rather than a forced closure in order to be better able to manage and mitigate the impact on pool users.

With regard to the projected £30,000 in-year saving, this will now not be realised primarily because, at the explicit request of those exploring an option for a local community group to run the pool, we have not drained the pool. This requires ongoing operation of plant, filtration and cleansing of the water and any ongoing repairs and maintenance to facilitate this, as well as regular checks on the premises.

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Phil Vaughan to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:

Arthur Hill Pool

The Council of Governors of the Royal Berkshire Hospital Trust recently announced it would suspend its much-criticised plan to close the hospital's Hydrotherapy Pool. At this Governors' meeting the representative of Reading Council, Councillor Tickner, said that consultation by the Hospital over the decision to close that pool had been "found to be wanting".

Last September, Reading Borough Council decided to close Arthur Hill Pool and Gym with no public consultation whatsoever, so can Councillor Gittings tell me please whether he considers that Reading Council has also been "found to be wanting" in this respect, and what lessons the Council has learnt from the Arthur Hill shambles?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your question Mr Vaughan. I have fully and repeatedly set out the rationale for the planned closure of Arthur Hill Pool in the context of the council's extraordinarily difficult financial position - and I know that you and other campaigners have attended recent meetings where other agenda items, including those tonight, have shown the extent of the problems we have thanks to Tory government cuts.

It remains the firm view of myself as Lead Councillor and the Administration that to spend large sums of money to keep Arthur Hill pool open, pending its replacement, would not have represented good value for council tax payers. A planned closure was therefore proposed to better manage the impact on individuals and user groups such as clubs and schools through consulting on alternative provision.

It has also avoided the very real risk of an unplanned, forced closure that was becoming increasingly likely due to the very poor condition of the pool's essential infrastructure.

As regards Mr Vaughan's specific point around consultation, I would point out that the Council had already stated its intention to close Arthur Hill and replace it with a new facility at Palmer Park at a meeting of this Committee in November 2015, when I presented the new leisure strategy.

The timing of the closure, as I have stated earlier in this answer, was purely dictated by financial and budget imperatives and to launch a consultation when the decision had already been made would have served no useful purpose and undermined the basis of other genuine consultations where services are at risk.

In these circumstances, it is my opinion that rather than a 'shambles' the council has acted in the best interests of the town and the judicious use of scarce public funding, whilst seeking to mitigate the impacts as far as possible.

I would also point out that unlike the hydrotherapy pool at the hospital, which is a specialised resource with few if any local alternatives, there remain a range of publically accessible swimming pools both in Reading and close by in neighbouring authorities.

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Tom Lake to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:

New Swimming Pools

In a paper for the October 2016 Policy Committee the following timetable was given for development of permanent pools at Rivermead and Palmer Park:

OJEU notice and PQQ documents issued - February 2017

Stage 2 - Submission of Outline Solutions - May 2017

Stage 3 - Submission of Detailed Solutions and Dialogue - November 2017

Stage 4 - Final Tender and award - January 2018

- 1) Is this timetable still valid?
- 2) Will the Borough Council be making a financial contribution?
- 3) Will the Palmer Park development include a learner pool?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your question Mr Lake. In response to the separate elements of your question:

1. The timetable remains broadly valid although we know that it will slip by up to two months at the front-end of the process to accommodate the thorough preparation of all the contract documentation required at PQQ stage. We do not currently envisage any further slippage once the procurement process is initiated.
2. The Council is procuring a new leisure operator under a Design, Build, Operate and Management (DBOM) contract to drive the best possible value for money. At this stage the scale of any financial contribution from the Council cannot be specified but the aim of the procurement process is to deliver significant savings compared to the current costs of operation. As already publically reported the value of any capital receipts that might be obtained from the disposal of the Central and Arthur Hill pool sites will be used to contribute to the capital costs of the new facilities that will be delivered under the new contract.
3. Yes - we currently envisage that a learner pool will be provided as part of the development of new swimming facilities at Palmer Park.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services:

Children's Services Agency Social Workers Overspend

A large part of the Council's shocking £7.5 million overspend is on agency social workers in Children's Services. Please can the Lead Councillor confirm what percentage of social workers in Children's Services are from agencies?

REPLY by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services):

The Council is working to increase the establishment of permanent social care staff employed by the Local Authority. There have been sustained British and overseas recruitment campaigns to increase our social work establishment. This ongoing drive for permanent recruitment is set within the context of a national recruitment crisis across social care staff at all levels.

The additional cost to the Council of agency staff projected over the full financial year 2016-17 is £3.4 million across children's services. This spend, though regrettable has been essential in enabling Reading to deliver services to children and families at a level that is deemed to be appropriate, in terms of size and complexity of caseloads.

The current level of agency social workers is 47%. At its peak Children's Services had 56% of agency Social Workers in June 2016. The percentage of RBC substantive social work staff continues to slowly increase in line with ongoing recruitment campaigns and the projection to March 2017 is that the Council will have 37% agency social work staff. This will mean that we will be at our lowest level of agency social workers since June 2015. We are committed and working hard to continue to reduce the percentage of agency staff employed in Children's Social Care, it is one of the key indicators on our improvement journey and is reported to the Children's Improvement Board monthly.