

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (CUSTOMERS AND PARTNERSHIPS) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Thursday, 3 November 2022.

PRESENT: Councillor N J Hunt – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, M J Burke, S Bywater,
S J Criswell, M Kadewere, C Lowe,
S R McAdam, D J Shaw and G J Welton.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors J E Kerr and J E Harvey.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors B M Pitt and S L Taylor .

12. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7th July 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Minute 22/11 was corrected to read Her Majesty the Queen, after which the Minutes of the meeting held on 8th September 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

13. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

14. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel received and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which has been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st November 2022 to 28th February 2023.

15. ONE LEISURE PRICING PROPOSAL 2023-24

By means of a report by the Interim Head of Leisure (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the One Leisure Pricing Proposal 2023-24 was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard from Councillor Welton, who stated that he broadly agreed with the proposed option 2 price increase, remaining mindful that One Leisure needed to remain sustainable whilst staying within financial reach of residents. Councillor Welton continued that he was sure all would agree

the importance and connection between physical and mental wellbeing especially after the testing nature of the previous few years. Reassurance was sought that the attendance, customer retention and new membership would be monitored across One Leisure sites and reported back on a quarterly basis, the Panel heard that this is already covered in the quarterly reports which are seen at the Overview and Scrutiny Performance and Growth Panel. In response to a further question asking if there would be scope for centres to negotiate with local groups to secure regular bookings ensuring long term use of the facilities, the Panel were further advised that following new appointments within One Leisure, links would be established with local fitness groups to ensure that fitness remains accessible with the importance of fitness to improve mental wellbeing being noted.

Councillor Bywater stated that he felt it was important to note that in order to make leisure affordable and achievable to residents of the district, the previous administration had made no increase to pricing over the previous 4 years. This was noted to be especially important to those who were in financial difficulty and there were fears that increasing prices would potentially make leisure unaffordable for some with concerns that residents would be forced to choose between heating and food, therefore it was felt to be wrong to assume that households would have spare income to take up physical activities such as weightlifting. Further concern was expressed that the proposed model relied on consistent footfall maintained at current rates, which may not be the case if prices were to be increased and may in fact have a detrimental effect on the services and facilities provided. Councillor Bywater questioned the Portfolio holder to clarify what had been done to increase footfall and customer retention in relation to this paper. Councillor Bywater further questioned the figures shown in the Appendix to the report and requested more clarity on the comparison between the current income versus potential income. In response to both questions, the Panel heard that detailed work had been undertaken to ensure the needs of residents and accessibility were taken into account alongside benchmarking and competitor analysis.

Councillor Lowe enquired what work had been done by One Leisure on generating alternative revenue streams through use of the pools by other providers such as aqua clubs or physiotherapy services, the Panel heard that this was something which would be picked up under the One Leisure Active Lifestyles umbrella as well as continuing to work with local fitness groups to maximise revenue streams and accessibility to fitness for all residents.

Following repeated questioning from Councillor Alban on the report author, as he felt some comments were politically volatile and inaccurate, the Panel heard that a balanced approach had

been taken between the Officer and Executive Councillor who were both present in the meeting to jointly present the report. In response to Councillor Alban's question about pricing residents out of the facilities, the Panel were reassured that the Executive were mindful of the current economic climate and had ensured that the One Leisure Concessionary Scheme had been made more visible on the One Leisure website so that those who were most affected were still able to access the centres and fitness provision.

Councillor Alban further questioned the validity of the report due to the absence of mini soccer as a revenue stream. The Panel were assured of robust figures within the report as pitch hire for mini soccer was included within the grass and 4G pitch hire lines.

Following a question from Councillor Burke on the future plans and strategy for the Burgess Hall site, the Panel were assured that an update on this would be brought to the Panel in the coming months for discussion.

In response to a question from Councillor Alban who felt that the Courts for Kids scheme could help combat youth dropout rate from team and organised sport activities and that this scheme should continue to be marketed to encourage customer loyalty across the lifespan of residents, the Panel were assured that a new business strategy was being developed which would be brought to the Panel to provide an update in the coming months.

Councillor Shaw enquired whether the predicted increase of 88% in energy bills was still realistic, the Panel were assured that the figures were based on what is known at the moment but would be continually monitored.

Councillor Criswell commented on the proposed change of pricing being a political decision and that prices would be increasing at the worst possible time for the centres users, a fact which he felt would be generally accepted by the Panel, and enquired what the alternative plan would be should a review in 6 months find significantly reduced use of the centres resulting in the centres no longer serving the residents and their needs. Councillor Criswell stressed the importance of a plan for recovery which he felt must have been considered by the administration having made a political decision to proceed with the proposed cost increases.

The Panel were advised that advice had been taken from the industry body UK Active and that the proposed plan would allow the centres to remain competitive in the marketplace whilst still serving local communities. The Panel were further assured that research had been undertaken on similar models already

implemented in other centres across the country and early indications showed that there had been no negative impact. The proposed pricing option B would allow the service to remain competitive within the marketplace with the least impact on residents.

Councillor Criswell further questioned whether the Portfolio Holder was happy with the political decision to increase prices and what they would propose to do should the increase prove detrimental to the centres. The Panel heard that the Council needed to be mindful that the leisure provision could not be subsidised however much that may be desired. The proposed plan would ensure the sustainability of the One Leisure centres and that they could continue to be operated by the District Council. The importance of the centres and their role within the community was understood by the Executive, who had full confidence in the success of the proposed option B increase, therefore an alternative plan had not been made at this time. The Panel were further assured that footfall and income was regularly reviewed and action taken as required. Councillor Criswell responded that he was pleased to hear the desire to keep the service sustainable but remained concerned that the increased pricing would result in a section of society being prohibited from using the centres at the expense of keeping them sustainable.

Councillor Alban expressed that whilst he understood the need to be proactive and keep the facilities sustainable, the lack of an alternative plan, not only for income but to also maintain accessibility to fitness provision for all, was of great concern.

Councillor Bywater echoed the Portfolio Holder's concerns over the potential loss of public swimming pools across the district, and highlighted the plight of Sawtry swimming pool. The Panel heard that this facility had previously been managed by the Council but had been transferred to another leisure provider under the previous administration. The Panel were further advised that whilst the Council was not in a position to once again manage the facility, operational skills and support had been offered by the Leisure team to assist the current operator should they decide to reinstate the facility for the community. Councillor Bywater expressed grave concerns that the proposed price increases would be felt by some residents more than others as up to 40% increases were proposed in some activities. Councillor Bywater further stated that whilst mindful of the current economic climate, not having an alternative plan was a massive concern.

In response to a question from Councillor Alban on what consideration had been given to not increase prices, the Panel heard that all options had been considered but that the service was still in the post COVID recovery stage and that the

proposed focus on increasing footfall as well as direct debit membership opportunities was due to the fact that those streams drive the revenue forward. It was noted that pay as you go options would remain available for all fitness and leisure activities.

Councillor Shaw empathised on the timing of the proposal within the current economic climate but observed that the example of Sawtry swimming pool highlighted the importance of the proposed price increase to ensure better economic sustainability across the centres.

Following the discussion of the report, it was thereupon

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to endorse the recommendations within the report.

16. WARM SPACES

By Means of a report by the Corporate Director - People (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the Panel heard about the Warm Spaces initiative.

The Panel heard that although the majority of locations so far were in bigger towns and villages, all facilities identifying as warm spaces could apply for funding from the Community Chest Fund. As more groups are established, gaps will become identified and work can then be undertaken to help support groups in those areas.

Following an enquiry from Councillor Criswell, the Panel heard that there would be support to empower volunteers and to assist existing groups in supporting local residents. The Panel were further assured that support for dealing with those in immediate crisis would be paramount alongside helping residents establish long term solutions.

The Panel were advised that a map of warm hubs across the district would be provided in answer to a query from Councillor Alban. Following a further enquiry from Councillor Alban, the Panel heard that the Community Chest grants were capped to ensure as many groups as possible could be supported across the district.

Councillor Lowe enquired how those in need would be encouraged to attend the spaces and observed that there may be some social stigma attached to the centres. The Panel were reassured that by working with volunteers in the local community some of the anticipated stigmas would be addressed. The Panel also heard that some of the warm spaces

were adapted from existing social gatherings, such as coffee mornings, which would help encourage vulnerable residents to attend. Volunteers within the spaces would be trained and supported to help assist residents with unlocking long term support such as unclaimed benefits.

Following support for the scheme from Councillor Bywater, it was then enquired what barriers to employment were currently impacting residents. The Panel were assured that by working with Partner organisations such as the Department of Work and Pensions, the Council would assist residents into employment by clarifying support available to aid the transition into employment and alleviate concerns around the differences from any benefits and support currently received.

The Panel heard, following a question from Councillor Shaw, that by working closely with the County Council and other partnership organisations across the district, the Council would be able to ensure that vulnerable residents were being supported. It was further elaborated that this partnership approach may involve signposting to hubs outside of the district area as they may be more accessible for those residents living on the fringes of the district.

Councillor McAdam observed that despite the unprecedented situation, partnerships with the volunteer sector would allow better communication with communities and enable barriers to be broken down with residents engaging with services. The Panel was assured that feedback would be obtained and fed back to establish progress and success of the project.

The Panel were further assured, following an enquiry by Councillor Welton, that the work being undertaken on the project was currently resourced and also utilised the Council's apprenticeship scheme. However, long term options would be investigated with partners to ensure funding remained in place and residents would continue to be supported.

17. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Panel.

Chair