

TANDRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

STRATEGY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes and report to Council of the virtual meeting of the Committee held on the 8th October 2020 at 4.00pm via Zoom.

PRESENT: Councillors Elias (Chair), M.Cooper (Vice-Chair), Botten (Vice-Chair), Caulcott (Minute 151 only), Davies, Duck, Langton, Lee, Pursehouse, Sayer, Bloore (in place of Milton), Jones (in place of Caulcott) and Lockwood (in place of Bourne for Minute 151 only)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Allen, Connolly, Farr, Fitzgerald, Mills, Morrow, N.White, Orrick, Parker and Wren

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillor Bourne and Milton

147. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 22ND SEPTEMBER 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on the 22nd September 2020 were agreed.

148. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared non-pecuniary interests in minute 143 below.

- Councillor Cooper (wife is current member of Freedom Leisure)
- Councillor Bloore (current member of Freedom Leisure)
- Councillor Morrow (current member of Freedom Leisure)

149. TO DEAL WITH ANY QUESTIONS SUBMITTED UNDER STANDING ORDER 30

Six questions had been submitted. Five from members of the public and one from Councillor M. Cooper.

Question from Dawn Dawkes

The following question was read out behalf of Dawn Dawkes (she was unable to attend the meeting).

“Please can you tell me when the pool at village health club, Caterham will be open? It had been a godsend for my mental health and physical exercise the last 2 years. I suffer from Achilles tendinitis and calf problems and cannot do a lot of the exercise classes or use the gym, so I used the pool for swimming probably 4 to 5 days a week. I am a fully paid up Premier member, and although I see that De Stafford is opening the timings before 8:30 am and after 7 pm are not suitable for myself or a lot of people.”

A lot of people are suffering from mental health because of the virus and are really needing a 'get away', and this getaway is a little swim for some!!"

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

"The Leisure provider Freedom Leisure has taken the decision to not reopen the Village Health Club. Information provided from Freedom Leisure indicates that this is due to the size of the facilities and that usage would be significantly limited due to social distancing thus making it unprofitable at this stage.

The deStafford facility is not owned by Tandridge District Council and any facilities provision is a matter between Freedom Leisure and DeStafford School."

Question from Chris Shortman

The following question was read out behalf of Chris Shortman (he was unable to attend the meeting).

"How is it that the [Oxted] pool can reopen for swimming lessons yet remain closed to adult swimmers. If the pool is being heated it must be suitable for Lane swimming as well. I have the following questions:

- figures of c £500k are being put forward as required by Freedom Leisure to reopen the pool. Given the above statement if correct, how can that be justified and as this is a Tandridge community pool run by Freedom Leisure, what steps have TDC taken to verify these requirements?

- given that swimming plays an important part in the fitness of many individuals, both mentally and physically, how can TDC justify granting Master Park £500k for a future project that may benefit a few when there is an immediate need now to resolve COVID 19 issues?

-how is it that Freedom Leisure can offer more swimming lessons as per their Facebook page but not open the pool to adults. Are they serving the community they manage the pool for and what are TDC going to do about getting the balance right?"

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

"Information from Freedom Leisure indicates that the cost of extending the pool facilities would be increased and would not at this point be financially viable. This is a business decision taken by Freedom Leisure.

This evening Members will consider what financial support can be reasonably given to Freedom Leisure. Details of the breakdown of the requested financial package will be presented to Members to enable their deliberations.

The funding for the Pavilion at Master Park has not been made from the Councils general revenue budget but from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). This money is ring fenced for infrastructure projects that benefit the community and is raised from a levy on developers. There are strict government regulations on how this is both raised and spent."

Question from Bob Dalziel

The following question was read out on behalf of Bob Dalziel (as he was unable to join the meeting)

"I am a long time member of Tandridge Leisure Pool and usually swim approximately 10k per week at Tandridge Leisure Pool. I am currently a member of Edenbridge Leisure and manage to swim some 7k per week at Edenbridge and am considering joining Edenbridge Piranhas. Please could you explain how it is financially viable for the pool to be heated and cleaned in order for swimming lessons to take place, whilst not viable for lane swimming for members? If the Tandridge Leisure Pool has not been opened for covid -19 safety reasons, please can you explain the significant differences between De Stafford (and Edenbridge for that matter) and Tandridge pool arrangements that prevent Tandridge pool from opening for lane swimming?"

May I also take this opportunity to point out that my young Grandchildren are deprived of their swimming development which was going well prior to lock down. Please could you explain how young children are going to recover the critical lost weeks of experiencing the swimming pool? If the Tandridge pool is not to open now, what needs to change prior to it opening (or is it closed indefinitely)?"

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded to the question (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

"My response to the previous question sets out the response from Freedom Leisure with regards to the extended use of the Pool.

This evening, this Committee will be asked to consider a financial package of support for Freedom Leisure. I would however point out that operational decisions on opening of facilities remain with Freedom Leisure."

Question from Martin Caxton

The following question was read out on behalf of Martin Caxton (as he was unable to join the meeting)

"Please can you tell me why the Oxted leisure centre has not fully opened?

We have a virus that principally threatens the elderly and we should do everything that is possible to protect them. However, there is a long list of other diseases and afflictions that are all queuing up to kill us and we can't just focus on a single one. The leisure centre is important to maintain the health of the community. Healthy people are more likely to fight off this virus than the unhealthy, so it is important that the leisure centre is functioning properly. I would suggest that the swimming needs to be re-opened as soon as possible. I also suggest that the heating and air conditioning needs to be re-instated so that people are not working out in the cold."

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded to the question (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

"In March 2020 the Government required that all Leisure centres be closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In late July, centres were allowed to reopen but with substantial restrictions regarding social distancing. Many providers have taken a business decision not to reopen in these circumstances as they would in effect be running at a significant loss.

Those companies who provide facilities on behalf of Councils have approached Local Authorities for financial support. This evening this committee will consider what support can be given.

It should however, be borne in mind that all Councils have financial challenges of their own because of COVID and the money that has been spent as well as loss of income means that Councils have limited resources."

Question from Fiona McNicol

The following question was read out on behalf of Fiona McNicol (as she was unable to join the meeting)

"I have been a supporter and member of Tandridge pool since it opened. Before I retired, I swam every day before commuting to London. Latterly, I've continued to swim daily at a more leisurely pace. The early morning swimmers are a community that support and encourage each other. Many of the swimmers are able to walk to the pool or hop on a bus or train, they don't have to drive as the pool is central to the town. Hence, the pool is popular and well supported.

I believe it would be a great loss to not reopen the pool to general swimmers. I don't understand how it can be financially viable to heat the pool for swimming lessons and not use it for the remainder of the day and evening.

Please explain your reasons for being the only council that has not reopened their swimming pool."

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded to the question (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

"Tandridge is not the only Council in the Country, nor indeed the County that has not as yet, provided financial support to the leisure provider. Many councils are needing to weigh up the financial challenges that COVID has brought and balance the need to provide statutory services against the wish to help leisure centre providers. This evening this committee is being asked to decide on what support it can give to Freedom Leisure to assist them."

Question from Councillor M. Cooper

Councillor M. Cooper read out his question

"In answer to Cllr Connolly's question at the last Strategy and Resources meeting held on the 22 September "I am getting very concerned about the amount of officer time and thus taxpayers money being spent on internal procedures." The answer put forward by the officer was "Calculating officer time on this work will in itself will be an exercise which will not add value and take the council forward."

From this statement it is abundantly clear that this council has absolutely no understanding of what we did actually cost the taxpayer. Was the cost of the internal procedures work £10,000 or £100,000 or perhaps many hundreds of thousands of pounds. Apparently, we have no idea! Whilst a council with endless resources may live with this we all know that TDC is in straightened times and that we must husband all of our resources to best effect. Vanity projects and endless rewriting of council procedures cannot be a priority, especially at this time. The intended work on climate change is not Business As Usual and whilst councillors will be asked to agree what we want to see carried out, there will be a series of projects, some of which may be very expensive, which councillors will be asked to approve. How can councillors make good decisions on this area without proper information?

Whilst we can budget for Business As Usual work based on previous years activities, I feel it is vital that before councillors are asked to agree any new project that i) we need to precisely define what we intend to achieve, ii) we need a proper plan with full definition of resources and timescales and iii) a cost/benefit analysis. How else can councillors take properly considered decisions without such information?

Secondly, lately we have seen a much better statement of the council's financial position. It is a difficult one! In future we must be able to monitor the progress and cost of any particular project, ideally on a month by month basis to match the much improved provision of financial information, otherwise how can councillors make decisions on whether particular projects should be paused or even stopped if financial considerations require action?"

Paul Smith, the Interim Transformation Lead, responded to the question (at the request of the Chairman) as follows:

“Good governance is there to ensure that the Council acts lawfully and with probity. Governance is by its nature Business as Usual.

When the Council moved into a position of no overall control it became necessary to review its approaches to governance to otherwise risk the Council being unable to make decisions and thus having an element of paralysis.

Events that took place in 2019 also called into question the effectiveness of Governance within the council at all levels and it was necessary to seek a review of governance which was commissioned with member approval. The outcome of this review by the Centre for Public Scrutiny was that a number of changes needed to be made to ensure safe and proper governance. This has been the focus of the internal work. The majority of this work has been carried out by existing employed officers and therefore the cost has been an opportunity cost whilst officers have been doing this and de-prioritising other work.

It is fair to say that aside from the mechanics of the necessary governance changes it has been necessary to effect cultural changes amongst officers and members to enable these new ways of working. This is still a work in progress and members will be aware of the challenges.

With regards to climate change, the Council declared a Climate Emergency in February 2020 and therefore action plans which are brought to committee are necessary to support this policy.

The Council is in a challenging financial position and one where some very difficult decisions will need to be made. In order to make these decisions members will always be presented with the full financial implications. Furthermore, under the new approaches for budget monitoring members will be receiving meaningful and regular information.”

Councillor M. Cooper asked the following supplementary question.

Climate Change will bring forward new things, that's fine, will we have full financial statements about any of these individual items that are brought forward so that councillors can understand what they're going to cost, what they're going to do, and what they're going to achieve? Because without that, we're wasting our time really. Potentially, we're spending money on anything.”

Councillor Elias responded to the supplementary question.

“I assume that we keep tabs on the cost of new projects anyway and the decision to declare a Climate Emergency was unanimous by this council or almost unanimous last February so it's something that is now imbedded in all our committee reports as members will have noted. Quite often it's a question of just bringing it to the public's attention- things that we are doing already. For example, in the newbuild council housing programme we automatically take into account the latest techniques that save energy and so on. Although we were a bit late for Bronzeoak which was pointed out recently because these projects have such a long lead time. It is something that is very much or uppermost on our mind and it's often not something that will involve actual extra expenditure. It's just a question of tweaking what we're doing already but then there may be instances where we may have to spend money. In which case, I'm sure it will be brought to committee in the normal way as part of our scrutiny of such projects.”

150. STREAMLINING THE PROCESS FOR APPROVING THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS

A report was presented to the Committee regarding streamlining the process for approving the Council's annual statement of accounts. It highlighted that in previous years, two committees had been involved in the process for considering the Council's final accounts for preceding year and the associated external audit. This had involved two meetings (one for Strategy & Resources and another for Overview & Scrutiny) often in the same week leading up to the statutory deadline for publishing the approved accounts with a duplication of reports. Officers had identified a need to eliminate the duplication by enabling the process to be dealt with exclusively by the Audit & Scrutiny Committee.

RECOMMENDED – that the following delegated powers 'to resolve' be transferred from the Strategy & Resources Committee to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee:

- approval of the Council's annual statements of accounts; and
- issues arising out of the financial audit of the accounts.

151. FREEDOM LEISURE - FINANCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH THE COVID 19 EMERGENCY

The Committee had resolved to move into confidential session for this item in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

RECOMMENDED – that

- A. senior officers enter into negotiations with freedom leisure with the aim of securing the future of leisure facilities in the district whilst cognisant of the financial situation of the Council;
- B. responsibility be delegated to the Chairman of this committee and the group leaders to agree a package not exceeding the equivalent of 12 months' rent (*see note below*);
- C. any financial support to be conditional on the immediate full re-opening of the Tandridge Leisure Centre swimming pool, in alignment with government guidelines; and
- D. written reports on the progress of negotiations be provided to this Committee on a regular basis.

NOTE: at the Full Council meeting on 22nd October 2020, recommendation B above was amended as follows:

~~"responsibility be delegated to the Chairman of this committee and the group leaders~~ Interim Chief Finance Officer & Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the Chairman of this committee and the group leaders, to agree a package not exceeding the equivalent of 12 months' rent."

Rising 6.50 pm