
Report of the Chief Recreation Officer

Scrutiny Board (City Development)

Date: 5th April 2011

Subject: Scrutiny of Council Budget Decisions on Leisure Centres

Electoral Wards Affected: All

☐

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

☐

Community Cohesion

☐

Narrowing the Gap

☐

Summary

The reduced hours and closures of sports facilities discussed in this report were designed to achieve savings, required as a result of the Council's budget strategy, with the lowest negative effect on the benefits of the service. A range of considerations was used to determine which sites should be reduced, in order to come to a balanced set of proposals.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Board meeting of 8 March 2011 received requests to scrutinise the reduced hours to be implemented at Garforth Leisure Centre and the closure of East Leeds Leisure Centre, and following discussion the Board agreed to do so. The Board also heard a similar request on the closure of the swimming pool at Middleton Leisure Centre and agreed to consider this as well.
- 1.2 These arose from the decision by Council at its meeting on 23 February 2011 to approve the recommendations of a report on the Revenue Budget and Council Tax 2011/12. The City Development part of this included at paragraph 3.4.1 the following:

“The 2011/12 budget for Sport and Active Recreation includes savings of £1m to be realised from a review of the implementation of the 10 year vision for Council leisure centres. Proposals include the closure of East Leeds Leisure Centre on the 31 March 2011 but to make it available for community asset transfer in line with the proposals outlined in the 2010/11 budget report. In addition, following a review of the level of subsidy across sport centres and swimming facilities and the availability of alternative facilities the following proposals are also included in the 2011/12 budget; to progress a proposal for community asset transfer for Garforth

Leisure Centre as from summer 2011 with a reduction in opening hours to 31 hours a week from 1 April 2011. Facilities at Middleton Leisure Centre will be enhanced by planned capital investment to playing pitch provision and changing room refurbishment and as part of the proposal to develop Middleton Leisure Centre as a dry side centre the swimming pool will close from September 2011. A reduction in the opening hours at Bramley Baths to 29 hours per week will also be implemented from this date”

- 1.3 Constitutional advice has been taken which confirms that a new resolution by Council, accompanied by balancing financial measures, would be required to vary these decisions. Therefore the closure of East Leeds Leisure Centre and the move to reduced hours of Garforth Leisure Centre have been implemented as of 1 April 2011. The budget decision by Full Council is not subject to call-in; neither did Scrutiny Board propose that its implementation be delayed.

- 1.4 This report sets out the service and financial context for the recommendations to Council and responds to specific issues raised in the requests for Scrutiny.

2.0 Financial Context

- 2.1 It has been widely acknowledged that the City Council faces a significant budget challenge over the next few years. For 2011/2012 alone the Council has had to find £90m of savings. In addition, in setting this budget the Council has been conscious of the need to protect, where possible, care services in the Children’s Services and Adult Services directorates. On this basis the City Development Directorate needed to deliver £14m of budget savings in 2011/2012 from its current net operating of £77m. Given the scale of this financial challenge, the Directorate has recognised the imperative to deliver savings from the start of the financial year to ensure that it is best placed to meet its budgetary responsibilities.

- 2.2 The Recreation budget was drafted to take account of the Council’s intention that reductions should not be achieved by “salami slicing” but should be driven by the budget strategy as approved at December 2010’s Executive Board, with a clear sense of priority, and should include radical adjustment of existing provision where this will deliver improved value for money.

- 2.3 The budget for Recreation required net £2.5m cuts (12.8% of net controllable budget), to which facilities savings in sport contribute £1m. This is Year 1 of a 4 year spending review programme, and further reductions are to be expected in future years. In addition to the reduction in the Sport’s budget, the corporate property maintenance budget was reduced by £1m (15.6%). This budget supports the decorative condition of buildings as well as background maintenance, and leisure buildings draw heavily on it, so a reduction without a corresponding reduction in facilities is likely to result in less attractive buildings and reduced income in the medium term.

3.0 Sports Facility Strategy – the Vision for Leisure Centres

- 3.1 The Vision for Council Leisure Centres, approved in August 2009, included plans to replace worn out or poorly located centres with fewer, higher quality, better located facilities. Their higher quality and better location would attract more participation, delivering one of the fundamental aims of sports provision, despite the number of sites being reduced. Increased participation would increase income, while the reduced number of sites would reduce the staffing and maintenance burden and enable resources to be focused on further improvement on customer service. Overall, this would result in a much more sustainable revenue budget. This strategy echoes similar strategies elsewhere in the UK, and the evidence is that these aims are

credible. The strategy in Leeds is at an early stage of implementation but participation has increased following the replacement of Armley and Morley centres, despite the closure of South Leeds.

- 3.2 Although the cuts have changed the programming and some of the detail of the Vision for Leisure Centres, they have sought to retain its fundamental aims and analysis.
- 3.3 The Vision was based on geographical analysis and assessment of the performance, accessibility and suitability of existing buildings and locations for refurbishment or renewal. It also took account of the predicted funding picture, although it noted that “it is vitally important that the plan retains sufficient flexibility to respond to funding decisions and any future opportunities...”.
- 3.4 The Vision aimed to provide Wellbeing centres to replace East Leeds & Fearnville, and Middleton. In both cases the resolution was “with a commitment to deliver and resource by 2013/15”. When the Vision was approved in 2009, the Council hoped to get Private Finance Initiative (PFI) funding for these replacement facilities. The PFI funding bids did not progress, and as there is no other short term source of funding, it is now clear that the resolutions for these areas will not be delivered on schedule. This alone required a review of these areas in the Vision; but plainly, the Council’s financial position required a wider review and reprogramming of the strategy. This needs a combination of performance assessment, with the aim of retaining the most cost beneficial sites, and geographical analysis, with the aim of retaining a geographically coherent network of sites.

4.0 Approach to assessment

- 4.1 There is no doubt that cuts in sports provision reduce the service’s benefits to individuals and the wider community. The eloquent presentations made by the petitioners to Scrutiny Board on 8 March set these out well. However even in “good” financial periods, the Council cannot afford to provide unlimited services, and choices have to be made – as described above, the Vision for Council Leisure Centres proposed a net reduction in the number of leisure centres. In order to decide on the “least bad” set of cuts, officers followed a largely (though not entirely) economic analysis. This is not a case of “knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing” but of trying to compare the values and the costs of several options, and making informed choices.
- 4.2 In formulating proposals for savings, officers aimed to take account of a balanced set of information rather than a single simplistic indicator. Appendix A sets out some key indicators used to assess the performance of leisure centres. A significant proportion of the cost of leisure centres is staffing, and Scrutiny Board should note that another part of the service’s budget plan is to reduce the staffing costs of leisure centres as part of a restructuring; the figures in Appendix A assume these savings are made. If current staff costs were used instead of these figures, the financial performance of all sites would appear worse and the savings from rationalisation would be greater than shown. Appendix B provides some further analysis of income and expenditure for each of the directly affected sites whilst Appendix C sets out further analysis of bodyline users per site.
- 4.3 In the first analysis, the column showing subsidy per user is useful as it is a helpful indicator of cost-efficiency. These figures vary widely, with East Leeds requiring the highest subsidy, at £2.98 per visit.
- 4.4 In assessing this, one consideration is the high cost of running swimming pools compared to the dry side, because of their high staffing and energy requirements.

Since the Council's intention is to sustain accessible swimming facilities as well as dry side facilities, comparisons between sites on the basis of subsidy cost per visit need to take account of this. In similar fashion, the average catchment of pools is larger than the catchment of dry facilities.

- 4.5 Another complication is that if a leisure centre closes – or if hours are reduced – some users will stop using the service altogether, but a proportion will transfer to other sites. The experience gained during the closure for rebuilding of Armley and Morley gave the service some useful understanding of the potential impact of these transfers. The proportion of users who will transfer will vary from site to site, because the accessibility of other sites to displaced users is not the same from site to site. The column in Appendix A on “projected lost visits if closed” is the service's best estimate of this. This column presents estimates based on informed judgment, not certainty. There is objective information to support the estimates, for example analysis of visits by card holders shows that 75% of those visiting Bramley, 63% at East Leeds, 62% at Garforth and 43% at Middleton had used another Council leisure centres between April and December 2010, compared to 25% at Wetherby. These estimates add the understanding of the comparisons between sites, and the consequences of different options. They highlight the geographical dimension; for example, users of more isolated sites like Wetherby and Aireborough would be much less likely to transfer to other leisure centres than users of more centrally placed sites, so loss of these sites was projected to lose 80% and 70% of users, compared to the more typical 50% to 60%. In this case, in both service terms and in economic terms, there is a good case for retaining a coherent geographical spread of sites.
- 4.6 Officers considered the capacity of alternative sites, and the ability of specific groups to transfer. For all the sites affected by the budget plan, the assessment was that the remaining Council sites could absorb their usage including school swimming and other swimming lessons, as well as club usage.
- 4.7 Of course, the picture is further complicated if reduced hours is an option alongside full closure; but in order to give usable like-for-like comparisons, the table sets out the estimated transfers for individual site closures.
- 4.8 In general, the savings from reduced hours would be much less than the savings from full closure, because significant costs are retained. However, although less effective, reducing hours still increases efficiency because peak usage hours can be retained, while off-peak costs are shed.
- 4.9 Transfers of patronage have a financial significance as they increase the overall saving to the Council. Virtually all the costs of the old centre are lost (if it closes) but some of the income is retained elsewhere. The columns in Appendix A on “Projected income lost if closed”, “Projected Saving including income transferring” and “projected saving per visit lost” work through the economic implications of this.
- 4.10 The Council aims to provide a leisure service accessible to all Leeds' residents. Accessibility is affected by geographical distribution as noted above. It is also affected by several demographic factors – wealth, health, age, etc. Some of the social and health benefits of the service apply particularly to people who are comparatively worse off on some of these scales. The information in Appendix A on number of Leeds Card Extra visits is a simple indication of whether closure of any particular site would have a disproportionate impact on these individuals and groups. Leeds Card Extra provides additional financial discounts to those offered by normal Leeds Card – typically, around 50% of the standard full rate. Leeds Card Extra is available to people on a range of benefits so a high level of use by Extra holders indicates a high level of

use by disadvantaged people. A parallel set of comments applies to Leeds Card 60+ which is also shown in Appendix A.

- 4.11 Although Appendix A does not directly refer to health, the best assessment that could be made of the health impact of different options, is as a combination of the likely loss of participation (“projected lost visits”) and the particular impact on more deprived communities as indicated by Leeds Card Extra visits (especially since disability benefit is one of the qualifying factors). Elderly users are likely to have particular health benefits and are also rather less likely to travel to other sites, so the Leeds Card 60+ information is also relevant to health.
- 4.12 Some important factors are not shown in Appendix A. In particular the grouping of leisure facilities. Officer analysis largely followed the geographical principles set out in the Vision for Council Leisure Centres, particularly the pairing of East Leeds and Fearnville, and of Kippax and Garforth. In these cases,
- Although East Leeds is a newer and better building than Fearnville it attracts many fewer visits overall and from Leeds Card Extra holders, and its economic performance is far worse. Fearnville also supports a large range of playing pitches including an all-weather pitch.
 - Garforth has much better financial performance and slightly higher usage than Kippax. However Kippax has a swimming pool, meaning that closure or reduced hours has a wider impact on a priority activity, and partially explaining the higher subsidy per visit. It also attracts more Leeds Card Extra users.
- 4.13 Finally, Appendix A does not assess the likelihood of achieving a successful Community Asset Transfer (CAT). This varies greatly – at Garforth there is a good prospect of success, whereas at some sites it is much less likely and indeed, attempts to achieve it to date for both South Leeds and East Leeds have failed.

5.0 Summary of update of the Vision for Council Leisure Centres.

Site	2009 Proposals	Current position and impact of Full Council decision.
South Leeds	CAT or close when Morley reopens	Now closed.
East Leeds and Fearnville	Replace with a new Well Being centre. Existing sites to remain until new centre is confirmed or suitable organisation for CAT “has been identified”.	East Leeds to close at end of March. No change to strategic intention to provide a single new centre in the medium term.
Garforth and Kippax	Replace with a new or refurbished leisure centre	Garforth to operate on reduced hours from 1 April, and CAT to be pursued. No change to strategic intention to provide a single new centre in the medium term.

Middleton	Replace with a new Well Being centre or CAT	Close pool but enhance remainder using S106 funding, with indoor refurbishment and new outdoor facilities including 3 rd generation artificial turf pitch
Bramley Baths	Refurbish	Move to reduced hours
Refurb sites	Refurbish Aireborough, Pudsey, Rothwell, Kirkstall, Bramley, Otley, Scott Hall, Wetherby	Bramley as noted above. At other sites, confirm intention to complete refurbishment programme when funding is available.
Holt Park	Vision assumes successful PFI scheme	PFI scheme is under review by DoH.

6.0 Considerations for individual sites covered by budget decision.

East Leeds

- 6.1 The budget for 2010/11 assumed the leisure centre would be subject to CAT in the course of that financial year, with therefore no budget provision to be made in 2011/12. The attempt to date to achieve CAT has failed, visits continue to fall and the estimated deficit per visit is the highest in the city. There is no capacity to re-establish the budget except by diverting support from other, better value for money sites and programmes. However, until alternative plans for the site are formulated and agreed, the Council remains open to receiving new expressions of interest for CAT.
- 6.2 The other services operating from this building were consulted over the impact of closing the leisure centre. The One Stop Shop was affected by other rationalisation plans and it was decided to consolidate this service in Osmondthorpe. The service has asked the provider of the ATM machine at their existing site to relocate an ATM to the Osmondthorpe site. The ALMO offices (which did not have a public reception) also moved out. The Youth Service has been planning for some time to make significant savings by rationalising its use of offices so is vacating this office on 31 March 2011. At the time this report was drafted the Youth Service was reviewing whether service delivery could continue in this building or transfer to another local site.
- 6.3 The strategic intention remains to provide a new leisure centre serving the combined east Leeds catchments of Fearnville and East Leeds, when funding conditions permit.

Garforth

- 6.4 At Garforth two factors made the likelihood of achieving an early asset transfer very good:-
- the presence of a community orientated secondary school run by a successful and dynamic Third Sector organisation with business skills
 - the synergy between the school's and the community's need for sports facilities, meaning that dual use is inherently efficient.

- 6.5 The transfer would enable restoration in full or large part of standard community opening hours. In the meantime, on 22 March the Outer East Area Committee decided to provide additional funding for Garforth to enable the opening hours to be increased from 31 per week. Constitutional advice has been taken which confirms that this does not conflict with the resolution of Council, whose decision means that the City Development budget cannot be used to fund more than 31 hours per week opening, but does not prohibit other appropriate funding sources being used.

Middleton Pool

- 6.6 A significant proportion of local swimming participation is now at the John Charles Centre for Sport, and another group of users moved to the new Morley pool when it opened in 2010. Although the Aquatics Centre at the John Charles Centre for Sport is geographically closer, it is still not fully perceived as the local pool for Middleton, and further measures will be taken to change this. The subsidy per user at Middleton is the highest in Leeds after East Leeds and Kippax/Garforth. Sport England's analysis in 2008/9 using their Facilities Planning model was that there is a role for the dry side but the pool was surplus to Leeds' sporting requirements. The proposal is to close the pool from the start of September (after the school summer holidays) while retaining and enhancing the dry side of this centre.
- 6.7 Investment in the dry side will be funded from a S106 sum of £1.9m which will fund improving the outdoor pitches served from the centre, including a new 3G artificial turf pitch, and improving the Leisure Centre changing rooms and entrance which also service the pitches. In addition Adult Social Care plans to invest in creating space in the centre suitable for day care centre use. Together, these create the prospect of a thriving community sports centre. In combination with the closure of the pool this could operate on a sustainable financial basis.
- 6.8 The Vision for Leisure Centres proposed Community Asset Transfer as a fall back, if the PFI bid in progress at that time failed. However officers consider the prospect of CAT is unlikely, at least if the pool is retained, in view of the centre's poor trading performance and high need for maintenance.
- 6.9 At Scrutiny Board, the view was expressed that the John Charles Centre for Sport is not seen as being for local users. This is a commonly expressed concern and it is accepted that there is a problem to deal with, although mapping the postcode origins of (card) users shows a heavy preponderance of use by local people. A number of responses are planned including improvements to the external environment round the centre, and outreach and sports development work to improve links with local communities.

Bramley Baths

- 6.10 Bramley is a cherished and attractive pool with architectural and social heritage, but the constrained site and constrained car parking space prevents the development of a wider range of leisure options which would normally provide cross subsidy. Moreover, although the site appeals strongly to a core of users, most users prefer more modern facilities. Since the opening of the new Armley leisure centre, a significant proportion of users have transferred from Bramley, and user numbers have dropped by approximately 30%. Pudsey is also in reasonable distance. Bramley now accounts for only 17% of the visits to these three sites. If the Holt Park Well Being Centre is confirmed, its catchment would be further eroded. In view of these factors, which have substantially increased the subsidy per visit at Bramley, the proposal is to reduce opening to 29 hours per week in September after the school summer holidays.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The information outlined above highlights the background to the budget decisions made with respect to leisure centres. It is acknowledged that Full Council had to make difficult budget decisions that, however, given the financial strain that the sports services had operated within in recent years, reductions in service were unavoidable. This position, coupled with the need to make immediate savings from 1 April 2011 resulted in the resolutions passed by Full Council on 23 February 2011.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 Members are asked to note and comment on the information provided.

Appendices

- A Leisure Centres key statistics**
- B Analysis of income and expenditure**
- C Bodyline Analysis**

Background Papers

None used