

Place and Resources Overview Committee – 10 February 2022

Agenda item 4 - Public Participation

Questions from Mike Carhart-Harris, resident and Wimborne Athletic Club member

As a Wimborne resident and member of a group (Wimborne Athletic Club) that uses QE Leisure Centre, I am deeply concerned about the recommendation that Dorset Council withdraws from the management of the centre. This would put well-used services for the school, community, clubs and vulnerable groups at grave risk of loss. This includes QE's swimming pool, crucial for giving children vital life-skills of swimming and water safety.

I would like to submit the following two questions addressed to Cllr Laura Miller at the Place and Resources Overview Committee on Thursday 10 February:

1. It is fair to ask whether the subsidy to QE Leisure Centre of £550,000 a year, a third of the council's leisure budget, represents value for money. However, it is not fair that the community of Wimborne and QE school could potentially lose vital health, fitness and sports services because of an historic funding anomaly rather than any proven lack of need or viability. As it is not clear from the report, can the council explain why the funding arrangement for QELC was allowed to become so disproportionate in comparison with Dorset's 7 other leisure centres?
2. Many Dorset leisure centres are managed in partnership with commercial leisure operators or social enterprises, or are wholly community owned, while continuing to be subsidised. However, the option for QE School to explore such an alternative operating model, which could ensure the continued availability of its existing facilities, is given little consideration as this would require ongoing subsidy. Rather than withdraw its funding from QELC entirely, why can the council not develop a more equitable distribution of subsidies that would enable all 8 existing leisure centres to continue to provide services to their communities?

Statement from Ross Bowell, Wimborne Academy Trust

Dorset Council's predecessor councils have operated joint use leisure facilities at Queen Elizabeth's School since 1974, and the current dual use agreement runs until 2086.

The school and trust's strong preference is that Dorset Council accepts the views of the overwhelming majority of respondents to the public consultation and retains the joint use arrangements for the benefit of the local community and the current and future pupils of the school.

Withdrawing from the agreement early may realise a saving for the Council's Place budget but it also has a direct cost of £279,500 per year of central government funding which will be removed from the Dedicated Schools Grant (see section 15).

However, as the Council seems determined to proceed, it must leave the school with a suitable facility.

This was recognised by the Corporate Director of Place in a meeting with the school and trust on 7 January 2021: "Dorset Council understands that there will be an upfront cost to re-provide at a reasonable standard. The revenue savings would offset this".

The exit proposals and capital sums set out in this paper are wholly inadequate to meet this commitment.

The Council and its predecessors have been the managers and majority users of QELC over nearly 50 years and have under-invested in maintenance and renewal. Many building services are original, dating back to the 1970s and 80s, are hugely inefficient, and are long overdue for replacement.

This is set out in detail in the April 2019 Dorset Property condition survey quoted in this paper, where the Council's own surveyors identified capital expenditure required of £1,165,720 to 2023/2024 and a further £714,050 in 2024/25. An independent survey would likely find the costs to be greater still.

The paper as presented makes a virtue of:

- opportunistically exploiting a contractual loophole to walk away from an arrangement made for community benefit that has lasted for almost 50 years and is due to run for over 60 more, and
- knowingly transferring existing liabilities away from the council on to the school, ultimately to the detriment of the education of pupils in Wimborne and East Dorset.

The Council should commission an independent condition survey, remodelling design and life-cycle costing services to properly establish the works required to re-provide at a reasonable standard for the school, and commit to funding the capital cost of these works.

The costs will be a small proportion of the value of the Place budget revenue savings over the medium term and will allow the Council to show that it is at least acting properly.