

Thank you for the opportunity to present this petition to council this evening. The petition was set up to protest the proposed closure of Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre in Wimborne and we continue to campaign for the reopening of the centre. While collecting signatures, I found that there is astonishment and dismay that it has come to this. We are grateful for the support of several local councillors and the new MP for Mid-Dorset and North Poole.

Wimborne is the fourth largest conurbation in Dorset and is growing rapidly but has no leisure centre or swimming pool. The growing population, with the right management, promotion and perhaps a public cafe means a well run health and fitness facility could be a profitable asset for the local community. Opportunities to market centre were missed; prices were kept the same for years. Run down dirty facilities and broken equipment meant it's not surprising that footfall decreased even prior to Covid.

The closure of QE will increase health inequality as those with additional needs are particularly affected. The closure of the pool means disabled people having to drive, if they can drive and have access to a car, as far as Blandford to access a suitable accessible pool. Surely this isn't realistic, as some people need to use the pool more than once a week to keep mobile? GPs can no longer refer people to leisure centre either, meaning more travel and inconvenience for those with health issues.

For those of us in good physical health, closing QE has meant the removal of all the many activities offered there. Being able to pop into the gym when it fits into your day, use the climbing wall, which is unmatched as far as Southampton, go for a swim or take part in a fitness class are things that we could enjoy and benefit from. Now we are told to find a suitable alternative, an additional 20 minutes from the centre that stands mainly unused. How does this line up with the Climate Emergency declared by the council? For the carless, health inequality rears its head. QE is a reasonable walk or cycle from the town and could be provided with a bus stop with only a small diversion from an existing bus route.

Our growing community with diverse ages and abilities could come together to benefit our physical and mental health at a reopened leisure centre. The community spirit was demonstrated in 1976 when the pool was partly funded by the people of Wimborne, who raised £7500 by public appeal and sponsored events. This petition shows that the community spirit is still strong.

The previous operators, Initio Learning Trust, are keen to engage with Dorset Council to reopen the Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre and we would ask you to take this opportunity and refer the petition to Committee and find a way to reopen this valuable community asset.

Thankyou.