

**NOTES OF A PUBLIC CONSULTATION EVENT
TO DISCUSS THE SOFT PLAY PROPOSAL
FOR THE SPORTS HALL AT PENDLE LEISURE CENTRE, COLNE
HELD AT THE MUNI, COLNE
ON MONDAY 18TH DECEMBER, 2017**

PRESENT:

Councillor M. Iqbal – Leader of Pendle Borough Council (In the Chair)

<i>Councillor A. R. Greaves</i>	<i>Deputy Leader of Pendle Borough Council</i>
<i>Dean Langton</i>	<i>Strategic Director (Pendle Borough Council)</i>
<i>Bernard Swarbrick</i>	<i>Chairman (Pendle Leisure Trust)</i>
<i>Alison Goode</i>	<i>Chief Executive (Pendle Leisure Trust)</i>
<i>Jason Whittaker</i>	<i>Finance Manager (Pendle Leisure Trust)</i>
<i>Vince Green</i>	<i>Financial Services Manager (Pendle Borough Council)</i>
<i>Lynne Rowland</i>	<i>Committee Administrator (Pendle Borough Council)</i>

Also in attendance:

Councillor N. Butterworth
Councillor M. Foxley
Councillor D. Lord
Councillor K. Turner

60 members of the public



Councillor M. Iqbal welcomed everybody to the consultation event, which had been organised following a decision by the Members of Pendle Borough Council.

The Council's Executive and subsequently the full Council had been notified of proposals by Pendle Leisure Trust (PLT) to redevelop Pendle Leisure Centre (PLC) in Colne. The Trust had approached the Council for a loan to finance the development.

The proposed scheme would see the development of Pendle Leisure Centre's sports hall to include:

- a brand new, state-of-the-art fitness studio
- a children's soft play area
- refurbishment of the current dry side changing rooms
- refurbishment of the existing Reception area
- introduction of a food and beverage facility

The Trust had been looking at the current usage/hires in the sports hall to determine what they could relocate to Colne Primet Academy and West Craven Sports Centre along with fitness classes that would need to be relocated to the new fitness/dance studio. It was acknowledged that it may not be possible to cater for all current users in any revised arrangements.

It had been agreed that a public consultation exercise should be carried out prior to any decisions being made, therefore, a survey had been published, for completion by 24th January, 2018 and this consultation event had been organised.

Those present were also advised that at some point in the New Year, a further consultation exercise would be carried out on the future provision of leisure and sports facilities generally across the Borough.

Before the meeting was opened up to questions and comments, the Council's Strategic Director gave a presentation which explained the Council's financial position and how this had affected the grant given to Pendle Leisure Trust, which had reduced significantly since 2010.

A question and answer session followed during which the following issues were discussed:-

- **Public access to information** – there was general frustration at the restricted access to information regarding Pendle Leisure Trust. Several requests had been made to view the accounts for the Trust and the Business Plan relating to this particular project.

It was felt that this information was essential to help people understand how the facility was being run at present; what market research/analysis had been carried out; the viability of the proposals; how three additional staff could be funded; and how the loan would be repaid.

It was explained that the Business Plan was commercially sensitive and could not be made public. However, it had been subject to separate review by both the Trust Board and senior officers at the Council and was considered to be based on assumptions that were reasonable.

The Council had viewed the income and expenditure projections for the first five years of the project. These showed a surplus of approximately £26,000 in the first year.

- **Viability** – Questions were asked about the viability of the proposals. The majority of people present anticipated that the soft play area would only be used at weekends and during school holidays when children were not in school or nursery.

In response it was explained that the facility would also be used on weekdays as it would cater for children from 6 months of age and special sessions for under 3s would be provided.

The Trust was asked if a portable soft play area that could be positioned when needed had been considered. The Trust confirmed that it had not.

- **Equality** – it was felt that by installing a soft play area that catered for a small age group it was effectively excluding the adult population and was stopping 'pensioners from exercising'. Many older people had been referred by their doctor and although alternative venues would be offered, these were inaccessible for some.

It was explained that referrals were made to the Up and Active Programme, which consisted of a wide variety of activities provided at various community locations across the borough.

- **What had been done to increase revenue, rather than focussing on cutting costs? -**
It was explained that efforts had been made to raise revenue and was acknowledged that some of the ventures had not succeeded, such as Urban Altitude which had closed down.

This led to a question about what would be done with the structure at Urban Altitude. It was explained that Burnley Football in the Community had expressed an interest and the logistics of moving the structure were currently being considered. The structure would be given away, which meant that there would be no cost to the Trust to take it down.

- **What other options had been considered?** – a number of visits and tours had been carried out at other authorities and trusts across the UK, which had included a Wednesday lunchtime/afternoon visit to a soft play area in Hyndburn. At that time approximately 20-25 children were using the facility. The benefit of this visit was questioned by some, as the visit had been pre-arranged. Speakers felt in their experience the soft play area at Hyndburn was often empty mid-week.

Other options considered included ten-pin bowling, trampolines and climbing walls. Trampolining had been viewed as a 'one-year wonder' and it was felt that the closure of a centre in Burnley supported this view.

A business case had been made for the soft play and climbing wall. It was noted that soft play had low staffing costs.

Due to the decline in usage of the sports hall at Colne which was now only 44% utilised, there was a need to bridge the funding gap. Although there was clear opposition, it was believed that the soft play area, with a quarter of the hall used as a fitness studio, was the best option.

West Craven Sports Centre was not considered a feasible location for the facility as it was operated as a dual use centre, with West Craven High School.

- **Contingency Plan** – the overall feeling from the public was that the soft play venture would fail. Reference was also made to the former leisure centre café that had closed down and why this would be any different. It was asked whether there was a contingency plan in place and, if the venture failed, how the loan would be repaid; would council tax increase; and whether the area would be returned to a sports hall or lost altogether.

It was accepted that the proposals were not without risk, but it was believed that these had been properly considered.

- **Alternative provision** – the sports hall currently catered for badminton, football, gymnastics, tai chi, trampolining, fitness classes, boogie bands and basketball.

Every effort had been made to accommodate existing users of the sports hall, either at the Leisure Centre or at other venues within the borough. All but one activity could be relocated. However, in many cases the alternative provision was unacceptable to the service users. Issues raised included –

- * West Craven Sports Centre, Barnoldswick is not easily accessible and is expensive to get to
 - * There is a limited bus service to Barnoldswick at night, when the sessions take place
 - * The facilities at Barnoldswick require upgrading – there is no heating; the lights don't work; the lights in the toilets don't stay on; and the store room door blows open
 - * The option to use Colne Primet Academy could be withdrawn at any time
- **Car Boot Sale** – it was stated that a car boot sale had been operational in the sports hall on Sunday mornings and, 12 -18 months ago it had been suggested that this be taken over by the Leisure Trust as a way of making money. It was asked whether this had been considered.

The Chief Executive of PLT advised that the car boot sale had been operated by a private business and that the option to purchase had not been put to the Trust.

It was also noted that the car boot sale only ran for three months of the year.

- **The operation of the Trust** – some people questioned whether the right people were running the Trust and why they were not able to make money.

It was explained that Pendle Leisure Trust was a charitable organisation that delivered non-profit making leisure services. The Trustees of the Trust were unpaid volunteers.

There was a great deal of pressure on the Trust in sustaining and delivering the current quality and scale of leisure provision across the Borough and this had been highlighted by an independent assessment made by a third party commissioned by the Council last year to review the Trust's operations. This had confirmed the Trust offered a cost-effective service and had been effective in maintaining customer income and minimising loss, despite the entry of low-cost competitors into the local market.

- **Staffing** – there was a misconception about the number of managers across the Trust and whether there was a full time manager at PLC.

For clarification, it was explained that currently there was one assistant manager and two customer focus managers at the Leisure Centre. There was approximately 220 staff across the Trust.

- **Promotion** – People felt that the services were not promoted effectively. It was stated that, back in February 2017, people had been told that the hall was closing which it was believed may account for the low usage rate. In addition certain sessions had been relocated to other venues in the borough at additional cost to the Trust. An example given was that the current revenue from activities relocated to Colne Primet Academy was split, with 70% received by the Leisure Trust and 30% by Primet.

Further comments on the low usage rates suggested that this could be down to there being no 'out of water' activities offered during the day; the limited opening times of the facilities; and the shabby appearance of the sports hall.

- **Sport England funding** - Reference was made to Pendle's share of Sport England funding that had recently been awarded to Pennine Lancashire. It was understood that this was a grant for sports and it therefore did not make sense to cut the sports facilities.

It was explained that the lottery grant aimed to increase activity in the c100,000 people in Pennine Lancashire that were physically inactive. It could not be used to subsidise existing services.

- **Petition** – Reference was made to a 2000+ name petition against the proposals and what impact this had made to the ongoing discussions.

It was noted that the petition had been presented to the Council and at present it had not been discussed with PLT. It was explained that this would be looked at in further detail once the official consultation period had closed, on 24th January 2018.

There was some doubt as to whether people had been misled into thinking that the whole Centre was at threat when being asked to sign the petition. The organisers of the petition made it clear that this was not the case.

The public also expressed disappointment at the format of the survey. A request for user groups to be involved in the structure of the survey had been declined and they now felt that the resulting survey had no facility for a counter argument to be put forward.

It was explained that this could be done via question 12.

Although the majority of those present opposed the proposed plans, a number of individuals had differing views. They accepted that it was not an option for things to continue as they were and that there may be a danger of the whole Centre closing if no action was taken. People were asked to recognise that Pendle was fortunate to have a variety of facilities including three fully equipped sports centres, three swimming pools, an athletics track and the Stephen Burke Sports Hub.

Conclusion

Councillor Iqbal thanked everybody for their attendance at the meeting and their contribution to the discussions. He reminded everybody of the consultation that would be running until 24th January 2018 and encouraged everybody to have their say. The results would be reported to the meeting of the Special Budget Executive on 7th February, with a final decision to be made at the Special Budget Council meeting on 22nd February, 2018.