

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITIES and HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

16 February 2021

Report of the Director of Street Scene, Leisure & Technical Services

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 PARKS AND LEISURE – RESPONSE TO COVID 19

Summary

This report updates Members on progress with the themes/activities identified within the Parks and Leisure section of the recently approved First Year Addendum to the Council's Corporate Strategy. This includes updates on the Council's Indoor and Outdoor Leisure Facilities, progress with Capital Plan Projects, and the 2020/21 Events Calendar. The potential outsourcing of Leybourne Lakes Country Park to the Leisure Trust is reported separately in these papers.

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 At its meeting on the 3 June 2020, Cabinet approved a First Year Addendum to the Corporate Strategy in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Addendum identified a number of themes/activities and, within each, identified specific service areas to be reviewed, with an aim to Re-orientate and then Recover these services. Cabinet also agreed that progress with these themes/activities be monitored through updates to relevant Advisory Boards and Committees.

1.1.2 Included within the Addendum was the theme/activity of Parks and Leisure and within the Review section the following service areas were identified:

- Review opening of main leisure centres in light of government guidance, as well as the re-opening of remaining outdoor leisure facilities.
- Review completion timescales of delayed capital leisure schemes.
- Review events calendar.

1.1.3 Further to the above the following were also identified under the Re-orientation section:

- In liaison with the Leisure Trust, look at indoor leisure provision service delivery arrangements – future amendments to the Agreement will be required.
- Ensure the financial sustainability of the Leisure Trust.

- Give consideration to the potential transfer of the management of Leybourne Country Park to the Leisure Trust.

1.2 Indoor Leisure Facilities

- 1.2.1 Government restrictions, including the lockdown have had a significant impact on the delivery of indoor leisure, with the second enforced closure of all facilities run by the Leisure Trust (Larkfield Leisure Centre, Tonbridge Swimming Pool and Angel Centre) taking place from the 20 December 2020 and Poulton Wood Golf Centre following on 4 January 2021.
- 1.2.2 As a result, the Trust lost all income streams once again except for a £5 per month retainer on memberships, whilst still incurring costs. Actions have been taken by the Trust to minimise expenditure in the same way as before including the furloughing of the majority of its staff, negotiating reductions on contracts and suspending staff pay awards in the current financial year. The Trust has also continued drawing down on its reserves.
- 1.2.3 In recognition of the impact that the closures have had on the Leisure industry, some grant funds have now been introduced and the Trust have benefitted from the Local Restrictions Support Grants with further funding possible later in the year.
- 1.2.4 The Council has also applied to the Government's new National Leisure Recovery Fund for a maximum allocation of £250k. It is hoped that the outcome of the application will be known in advance of the meeting.
- 1.2.5 Any reopening will again be in strict adherence to government guidance and subject to detailed risk assessments. This approach worked extremely well in regard to the reopening of the facilities previously with the Trust keeping customers fully informed as changes were introduced, resulting in positive feedback from customers.
- 1.2.6 During the second enforced closure essential maintenance work has once again taken place where possible, limiting future disruption when the sites reopen. This work has included work to install a new fire detection system at Tonbridge Swimming Pool and ventilation work in the dance studio at Larkfield Leisure Centre.
- 1.2.7 Members will be fully aware that the Angel Centre has been selected to become the mass vaccination centre for West Kent. At the time of writing this report it is anticipated that the vaccination centre will open on 8th February until the end of July 2021. The vaccination centre will use the Sports Hall, Creche and adjacent Dance/Fitness Studio. This is clearly a vital project for the health and wellbeing of the public with the Council and the Leisure Trust working in close partnership with the NHS.

- 1.2.8 When the facilities are able to re-open the Gym and Medway Hall will be available for workouts and classes, and the community areas will also still be accessible and available for public use as appropriate, based upon any ongoing restrictions.

1.3 Outdoor Leisure facilities

- 1.3.1 The Council's grounds maintenance contractor, Landscape Services, has continued to fully maintain public open spaces throughout the period of the most recent lockdown, and this has been essential in allowing residents to use the facilities for daily exercise in accordance with government guidance. The Council has, however, closed areas including ball courts, tennis courts and outdoor gyms in compliance with the latest guidance. Play areas remain open. Staff have placed additional signage in all key open spaces reminding the public of the government rules to be adhered to. The Council has also introduced Covid Marshalls in to its two Country Parks and key sportsgrounds in order to assist in maintaining the government rules.
- 1.3.2 Formal sports, including football, rugby and cricket on the Council's sports pitches ceased on the commencement of the most recent lockdown, though the basic maintenance of these facilities has continued.
- 1.3.3 Operations at Tonbridge Cemetery have also been under specific scrutiny and again all due consideration has been given to government and industry guidance which is reviewed on a continuing basis. Maintenance of the site and funerals have continued throughout the lockdown period though procedures and protocols have been adapted in liaison with Funeral Directors. The need to comply with social distancing rules has been the key consideration and, in line with government guidance, attendance at funerals and internments has been restricted. The Council has also made the decision to suspend use of the Chapel for services following previous growing concerns of higher Covid cases within the South East region.
- 1.3.4 It is also worthy of note that concessions at the Council's outdoor sites have been subject to change. Catering units (takeaways) and fishing remain open, however other concessions such as outdoor swimming, sailing, scuba diving and dog training have been temporarily suspended. Each Concessionaire has been required to submit, for Council approval, updated risk assessments and working practices to address government guidance and their own industry best practice/guidance. All concessions are being closely monitored to ensure compliance and are also required to seek Council approval for any proposed alterations or extensions to their service provision (many are for example operating reduced services and hours at the current time).
- 1.3.5 Looking to the future it is clear from the experience of the pandemic to date, that outdoor spaces have been key in enabling the public to leave their homes for exercise and enjoy a healthy lifestyle. The spaces have been extremely popular with many people using them and experiencing them for the first time. It is also

recognised that people who enjoy a healthy lifestyle and exercise have been more robust in tackling the virus if they were unfortunate enough to contract it. Whilst only time will tell it is anticipated that the outdoor leisure facilities may grow in popularity and usage levels will increase. This will need to be recognised in future maintenance schedules, Management Plans and improvement schemes, for example the capacity of the car parks and the emptying of litter bins. It may also offer greater income generating opportunities at specific sites most notably in regard to secondary spend such as catering. Whilst events on open spaces have been suspended during this time, the Council is seeing applications starting to come through for later this year.

1.4 Capital Plan Schemes

1.4.1 There were two significant capital projects which were progressed during the lockdown period.

1.4.2 Larkfield Leisure Centre Roof, Ventilation and Boiler replacement/refurbishment – on commencement of the first lockdown, works were paused. The Council, Leisure Trust and the contractors [Kier] worked hard to ensure progress on site could continue, while ensuring government guidance was fully adhered to. As a result work resumed and the following was completed on site:

- Removal of the old air handling unit in the plant room
- Delivery of the new air handling unit from Germany and installation
- Installation of new ventilation ductwork in the pool hall
- Installation of new LED lighting in the pool hall
- Removal of all external scaffolding
- Removal of the large internal scaffolding

1.4.3 Tonbridge Swimming Pool Roof – Members will be aware of the phased approach being taken to the replacement of Tonbridge Swimming Pool roof, with Phase 1 (front elevation) and Phase 2 (Reception area and Health Suite) being undertaken in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Due to the disruption caused to the operation of the facility by phases 1 and 2 it was agreed to defer Phase 3 (rear elevation) until October 2020. However, with the building closed through the first lockdown period Management Team agreed to bring forward these repairs to minimise the impact on users of the facilities and any loss on income claim from the Trust. Works were completed last summer.

1.4.4 A full update on other schemes within the Capital Plan was taken and approved at the Finance, Innovation and Property Advisory Board on the 6 January 2021.

1.5 Events Calendar

- 1.5.1 At the last meeting of the Board, events were being considered on a month on month basis as government guidance allowed. The majority, if not all event organisers had already taken the decision to cancel their events during 2020 given the restrictions in place. Two events did take place however, a three-day Music Festival and the Castle Ride both at Tonbridge Castle.
- 1.5.2 Bravo productions ran a three-day music festival during September. They adhered to the government guidance and put into place strict COVID measures to mitigate against risks. This was a great success and also generated income to the Council. The Castle Ride, a charity cycle ride run by Action UK took place and again worked well within the COVID restrictions providing the charity with a welcome fundraising opportunity.
- 1.5.3 Since December due to the lockdown there have been no events taking place. Government guidance will continue to be reviewed with regard to social distancing measures and guidance on gatherings. At the current time the Council is continuing to review authorisation for events on a month by month basis. The next scheduled event is due to take place at the end of April, this will be reviewed in March and a decision taken on its feasibility with the organisers in accordance with the guidance at the time. Tonbridge Lions have taken the decision to cancel the Summer Carnival scheduled for June and are hoping to run a smaller version in September. The Tonbridge Tattoo has also been cancelled due to concerns about the management of social distancing at a large scale event and a lack of rehearsal time.
- 1.5.4 The importance of events to local economies and communities is recognised and it is hoped that the proposed events for later in the year will be able to go ahead within the government guidance. All risk assessments now take into account COVID measures and further advice is sought from the Safety Advisory Group.

1.6 Youth Forum

- 1.6.1 Whilst not specifically in the 1st Year Addendum the TM Youth Forum has continued to run virtually throughout the year. The young people meet every 4-6 weeks to discuss issues that they are currently facing or areas that concern them. This has been a welcome platform for many and has proved a huge success. They have continued their work on the Safe Havens project and have brought in partner agencies to expand this project across the whole borough. This will provide information and advice to young people in accessible places. They have also worked with partner agencies to highlight the issues that have faced young people in regard to the pandemic and how they have been affected so that measures can be put into place to alleviate some of these concerns in the future. The Forum are planning to meet directly with Members of Cabinet in March to discuss the work of the Council and current priorities.

1.7 Legal Implications

- 1.7.1 The statutory framework governing the response to the pandemic is evolving and changing on a frequent basis, both in the restrictions placed upon individuals and upon the responsibility of local authorities. Specific proposals or changes brought forward following a review of the services will be assessed at the appropriate time in liaison with Legal Services to ensure they are lawful.

1.8 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.8.1 Management Team, and endorsed by Cabinet on 19 May 2020, imposed an 'essential spend only' policy for 2020/21 in order to preserve resources and set a 'savings target' of at least £500,000 to be delivered as a result of this policy.
- 1.8.2 An earmarked reorientation/post emergency reserve of £200,000 has been established to assist the Council in some of its recovery activity.

1.9 Risk Assessment

- 1.9.1 The departmental operational risk assessment has been updated substantially and is being revised on an ongoing basis as government guidance on Covid-19 changes.

Background papers:

Nil

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