



REPORT of THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP

**to
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
4 DECEMBER 2025**

MEMBER SCRUTINY REQUEST: COUNCILLOR A M LAY – LEISURE CONTRACT COMMUNICATIONS AND MESSAGING

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of its initial assessment of this scrutiny request.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee receives this report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group's initial assessment, and by way of an outcome, agrees to include the Working Group's conclusions on this request as part the proposed Leisure Contract post-implementation review.

3. SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 A scrutiny item request has been submitted by Councillor A M Lay as reflected in the proforma at **APPENDIX A**. This request focuses on the communications and messaging following the decision by the Council on 14 November 2024 to award a new leisure contract to its preferred bidder Places Leisure. Councillor Lay informed the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group (the Working Group) that despite the commitments given by Officers to that Council meeting in terms of ownership of this process, subsequent events had impacted on Members.
- 3.2 A significant implication of this new contract was the proposal by the contractor to change the facilities offered within the existing sports hall at the Blackwater Leisure Centre, such that certain users/groups would not be able to continue and would need to be found alternative facilities elsewhere. There is no request to review or scrutinise any aspect of the procurement process leading to or the Council's decision in relation to the leisure contract.
- 3.3 The first press release which announced the award of contract was issued on 29 November 2024 and referred to the number of exciting developments and significant investment in the various leisure facilities in the District and stated that over the coming weeks Places Leisure would be engaging with their existing members and centre users to explain what the changes and the new facilities will mean to them.
- 3.4 Details of the significant investment, in particular the proposed upgrading of facilities in the sports hall, were included in the report to Council on 14 November 2024, and at the Council meeting Officers gave an assurance on the need to contact those users affected by the proposed changes. There was however a time gap between the contract award decision and the actual completion / issue of the contract in April

2025 due to the legal work involved. There then followed engagement with the contractors during April and May 2025 to establish whether the proposed work to the sports hall would be deliverable this year or next. This then impacted on the ability to engage meaningfully with existing users until 30 May 2025, and any other forms of communication would have been premature.

- 3.5 A joint statement on behalf of Places Leisure and the Council was issued on 5 June 2025 in which it was explained that the first phase of the new investment was due to begin in August 2025. This would result in the closure of the main sports hall to allow for major work to be completed to turn the current space into a state-of-the-art Gym and Clip & Climb facility. A commitment was made to work closely with and assist users of the sports hall, including regular groups and clubs, to provide temporary and permanent alternative options. Meetings would be arranged with the impacted groups to discuss relocation options.
- 3.6 Members of the Working Group expressed concern at what had happened and dissatisfaction with the information / explanations given in the briefing note. Individual points included a lack of awareness that the sports hall would change, and Members being told that impact on users of the hall was not an issue. The feeling was the situation that arose where the public first saw this in the local newspaper and on social media should have been avoided, and the question was raised whether contact had been made with the users before the press release went out. It was also suggested that the initial press release should have indicated that there would be engagement over the coming months rather than weeks.
- 3.7 Further points included the short period of notice given to users to relocate, whether the proposed changes to the hall could have been deferred or delayed rather than inducing the panic that occurred, and that the Council should have displayed more visible ownership with a more central role in the communications rather than relying on Places Leisure.
- 3.8 Officers maintained that there had been good liaison with the users affected, with offers to help them. Incorrect information had appeared in elements of social media. It was however reported that the relocation of all affected users had now been satisfactorily resolved.
- 3.9 Reference was also made to the Leisure Contract Working Group which it was suggested should have been allowed to continue to oversee this project beyond the procurement stage.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The Working Group has made an initial assessment of this scrutiny request and has concluded that the Committee should be recommended to add this item to its scrutiny workplan for further detailed review as follows:
- Timeline of decisions and communications
 - Clarification of the nature of the contact with the hall users - whether contact was made prior to the press release and included an offer to meet with and help the users.
 - Undue responsibility put on Places Leisure for communication and engagement – should there have been more visible ownership from within the Council?

- Was the period from April to August 2025 insufficient to notice to users, particularly as it was understood at the time that alternative facilities at The Plume Academy would not be available for a while – why the August 2025 deadline? Was there scope to delay / defer sports hall changes so that there could be meaningful engagement with users?
- Members were given assurance that it would be dealt with sensitively. A Communication void meant social media was relied upon. What learning do we have here?
- Should the Leisure Contract Working Group have continued to meet beyond the procurement stage to oversee implantation issues such as engagement / communications?

5. IMPACT ON PRIORITIES AS SET OUT IN THE CORPORATE PLAN 2023 - 2027

5.1 Provide good quality services

- 5.1.1 Thorough scrutiny processes support improved performance and efficiency which in turn will contribute to the quality of services provided, and functions undertaken by the Council.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- (i) **Impact on Customers** – Individual scrutiny reviews will enable the impact on customers to be assessed. The subject of this particular scrutiny request directly relates to the experience of customers of leisure facilities provided on behalf of the Council.
- (ii) **Impact on Equalities** – Equalities are considered as part of the reporting on review work undertaken by Officers.
- (iii) **Impact on Risk (including Fraud implications)** – Scrutiny reviews enable potential Corporate Risks to the organisation and their mitigation to be identified.
- (iv) **Impact on Resources (financial)** – Scrutiny reviews offer the potential for an assessment of financial impact to the organisation.
- (v) **Impact on Resources (human)** – Scrutiny reviews offer the potential for an assessment of any resource impact to the organisation.
- (vi) **Impact on Devolution/Local Government Re-organisation** – None.

Background Papers: None.

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