

# Northern Rother District Councillors' Report January 2023.

## Temporary Closure of Rye Swimming Pool:

Members received a presentation by the Chief Executive Officer of Freedom Leisure (FL), outlining the reasons for and the events leading up to the temporary closure of Rye Swimming Pool. FL had been operating the leisure centre service for Rother District Council (RDC) since 2006 and had two managing contracts – Bexhill Leisure Centre and Bexhill Leisure Pool until 31 March 2024 and Rye Leisure Centre until 31 March 2026.

FL had experienced dramatic increases to their energy costs, which they had first advised all their clients of in autumn 2021. They were currently in receipt of the Government's Energy Bill Relief Scheme until 31 March 2023, at which point the Government would conduct a review of the protection for 'vulnerable' sectors. In addition, membership of the facilities had only recovered to 80-85% of the pre-COVID-19 levels, inflation was at its highest for 40 years, impacting staff and other costs and the cost of living crisis was impacting consumer behaviour.

Members were presented with a timeline of the events and discussions that had taken place, ultimately leading to the temporary closure of the swimming pool, together with details of the financial impact and other measures and mitigations that had been taken by FL to offset the additional utility costs and financial pressures.

Members were given the opportunity to ask questions and the following points were noted during the discussions:

- under the current circumstances, FL would not look to extend their contract in Rye beyond March 2026, as the site was not viable;
- solar photovoltaic (PV) panels might reduce utility bills by 20%, but would take four to five years to pay for themselves;
- opening hours were reduced initially after the COVID-19 pandemic, but were subsequently reviewed and reverted back;
- Rye Leisure Centre served a large catchment area;
- there was little wet facility competition in the district due to its viability;
- £90k had been requested from RDC in order to keep the swimming pool open, which was not possible without RDC making further savings;
- nine primary schools had been using the swimming pool;
- an initial study had been undertaken by RDC with Energise Sussex Coast to consider the installation of solar PV panels at Rye Leisure Centre, but no application had been made to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Panel yet, as the scheme was still in the feasibility study phase;
- RDC had been working with Rye Town Council (RTC) and FL to explore options to be able to reopen the pool and to look at how the current operating model could be changed in order for it to be viable;

- the two sites in Bexhill previously made a surplus which had been used to underwrite the site in Rye;
- various schemes had been introduced to encourage increased membership, such as GP health referral schemes, increased scope of youth membership and an over 65 membership, different pricing options and revamped catering facilities;

## **King Offa Housing Development (KORD):**

In 2019, the Council was awarded £500,000 from the Brownfield Land Release Fund (BLRF) Round 1 (a cross-government initiative) alongside Strategic Property Asset Collaboration in East Sussex (SPACES) to fund demolition/highway works on the KORD which formed part of the Old Bexhill High School Site. The BLRF was established to support council-led developments with remediation works on previously attributed Brownfield land e.g. industrial plots, garages, yards and carparks etc.

The Council was in the process of completing the land swap with East Sussex County Council (ESCC) which had been significantly delayed. It was noted that ESCC was required to provide the land with vacant possession, although Rother District Council was assisting with finding alternative premises for the current tenant.

It was crucial that the Council procured and spent the BLRF Round 1 funding before the deadline of March 2024. In 2019, outline planning permission for a mixed use development was approved on the KORD which was subject to a Section 106 agreement. Since that time, the construction industry had significantly changed therefore officers had reviewed the viability of the scheme and re-evaluated the established delivery route for the project. Results showed that there was an appetite to deliver housing and once remediation works were completed, officers would approach housing developers to deliver the site.

The development of this site had always been a two phased project with housing delivery followed by leisure facilities; whether leisure facilities would form part of the second phase would be dependent on the outcome of the current consultation into the Council's leisure strategy and would be a decision for the ruling administration at the time.

The £500,000 funding would be used as follows: £400,000 for an additional lane and junction work on the A259 and Combe Valley Way; and £100,000 for demolition and contamination remediation works. A further £305,000 would be required from the Capital Programme to progress the site to the next stage.

Following discussion, Cabinet was supportive of the scheme being progressed to ensure deployment of the allocated funds and recommended that £805,000 be included within the Capital Programme. Cabinet agreed that, subject to formal approval of the scheme, delegated authority be granted to the Director – Place and Climate Change to accept the £500,000 BLRF Round 1 grant to procure the contractors to deliver the site. It was also agreed that an additional £305,000 be taken from the Capital Programme to progress the project. Capital receipts received from the transfer of land would be reimbursed into the Capital Programme.

## **Fees and charges:**

Cabinet gave consideration to the report of the Head of Neighbourhood Services that detailed the latest review of the Council's fees and charges for 2023/24 and the proposed recommended increases. .

It was recommended that most of the fees and charges made by RDC be increased by 10% with the following exceptions:

**Beach and Foreshore:** As beach huts remained in high demand, it was recommended that the fees be increased to £694 (16%) per annum and the minimum transfer fee be held at £2,000 for 2023/23. It was recommended that seasonable tent site charges increase by 16%, boat licence fees by 20%, winches and equipment box fees by 23%, sailing/angling boat fees by 20% in 2023/24.

**Car Parking:** It was recommended that the car parking charges remained unchanged for 2023/24. It was recommended that parking permit prices across the district be increased by 43% (from £350 to £500 per annum). Due to significant increase in costs to manage Camber Western Car park, it was recommended that the summer season tariffs (from 1 April to 30 September) be increased in all Camber Sands car parks. The increased charges would be as follows: £3.00 (up to 1 hour), £7.00 (1 to 3 hours), £14.00 (3 to 6 hours) and £18.00 (6+ hours).

**Bulky Waste Collection:** It was recommended that the fee for the Council collecting four to six and seven to nine bulky waste items increased to £75.00 and £110 respectively.

**Garden Waste Collections:** The charge for garden waste had been increased to £50 from 15 July 2022. For comparison the garden waste subscription charges in neighbouring authorities were: Hastings £73, Eastbourne £57, Lewes £70 and Wealden £55. The total cost of the service was approximately £625,000 per annum. The projected income for 2022/23 at £50 per annum per bin at the current rate of just over 20,500 subscribers was approximately £1m. It was therefore recommended that the annual subscription be increased to £55 per annum which would result in an income of £1.1m.

**Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS):** As a revisit to rate a premises under the FHRS was not a statutory duty, it was recommended that a scale of fees be introduced.

**Health Certificates (for food exported):** Food exported required a health certificate. It was recommended that a scale of fees be introduced.

**Proof of Life Verification for Foreign Pensions (Appendix 9):** From April 2023, the Council would be introducing a £25 charge to carry out 'proof of life' verifications for foreign pensions. This charge is similar to charges made by other local authorities.

**Cllrs. Tony Ganly & Martin Mooney.**