

## **Council – 23 September 2013**

### **Petition – Walsall Gala Baths**

#### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 This report is in response to the petition *“We the undersigned do not wish to see the closure of Walsall Gala Baths as we believe that it is important to have swimming facilities in the town centre. Especially and in particular, we do not wish to lose the only BRINE pool that is centrally located, well used and much appreciated for its medical benefits to many of its users.”*
- 1.2 The petition contained in excess of 1,500 signatures. The Council’s petitions scheme provides that: “If a petition contains at least 1,500 signatures it will be debated at a meeting of the Council. This means that the issue raised in the petition will be discussed at a meeting to which all Councillors can attend and speak. The Council will endeavour to consider the petition at its next meeting although on some occasions this may not be possible and consideration will then take place at the following meeting. The petition organiser will be given 5 minutes to present the petition at the meeting and the petition will then be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 15 minutes. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting. They may decide to take the action that the petition requests; not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate, or to ask for further information. Where the issue is one where the Cabinet are required to make the final decision the Council will decide to make recommendations to the Cabinet. The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision and this will be published on our website.”
- 1.3 This report confirms that the Council is exploring a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. The report explores some of the issues and challenges associated with the long-term provision of services at the facility.
- 1.4 There are no current proposals to close the Gala Baths. Any future proposals will be subject to consultation commensurate with the proposals.

#### **2. Recommendations**

That the contents of the petition be noted and used to inform future budget considerations.

### **3. Background Information**

- 3.1. Gala Baths is a council owned and managed leisure facility in Walsall town centre. It opened in 1961 and comprises a 33.3m main pool, a 22.8m brine pool (the only one in the region), a fitness suite, a children's gym and a dance studio. In 2012/13, the Council's Sport and Leisure Service generated in excess of one million visits for the first time (1,076,748), of which Gala Baths accounted for 239,497 visits, making it the Council's second most popular leisure centre after Oak Park Leisure Centre.
- 3.2. The council has undertaken an 18-month review which has examined the Council's Sport and Leisure Service in detail, defining explicitly the service's core purpose, how the service can best achieve its purpose and how the service need to be configured to deliver value-for-money achievement of purpose. At the Council's Cabinet meeting of 24 October 2012 it was confirmed that "the overriding purpose of leisure services is to contribute to the health and well-being of local people."
- 3.3. The review also identified that Walsall has one of the highest levels of physical inactivity in the country and that key to improving activity levels was the provision of good quality, accessible swimming and fitness facilities. The age and consequent quality of the Council's 4 leisure centres are seen as significant impediments; they are no longer attractive to users or fit for purpose.
- 3.4. Furthermore, in a time of increasingly limited public resources, the existing leisure centres are likely to become increasingly expensive to run. Whilst they do not meet current expectations in terms of standards of provision, they will also become increasingly expensive to maintain as they age further. An estimate from Property Services indicates the maintenance cost of retaining the existing 4 centres for the next 25 years is in excess of £29m. The Council is faced with having to find ways to save £100m over the next five years and, unfortunately, with less money in the future, we'll be able as a Council to do less. In fact we will be doing much less so that some activities and services which people have come to expect will no longer be available because we can't afford them.
- 3.5. One of the outcomes of the review is a proposal to rebuild Oak Park and Bloxwich Leisure Centres to create two large, modern and sustainable leisure facilities. These sites represent the greatest potential for development into facilities of a scale that customers expect and that can be operated with greatest cost-efficiency. There are also further plans for a more modest refurbishment of Darlaston Swimming Pool.
- 3.6. In the context of a plan for the long-term future and sustainability of sport and leisure in Walsall, the role of Gala Baths remains unclear. The facility does provide the two activities that will encourage more people to be more active – swimming and fitness; it also attracts 20,000 visits per month. However Gala Baths is more than 50 years old, the main pool is too large and too deep with 600 rarely used spectator seats, the fitness suite is too small and the

changing provision is poor. There is no dry-side sports hall nor café / bistro. Whilst there are areas of obsolete space within the building, these being the old “slipper” baths upstairs, these would be both expensive to convert to an alternative use as well as being of a shape that does not lend itself to sport, leisure and recreation.

- 3.7 The constraints of the Gala Baths site (bordered on all sides by the Town Hall, Central Library, Hatherton Road and Hatherton United Reformed Church) make an expansion of the scale proposed at Bloxwich or Oak Park (4,500m<sup>2</sup> – 5,000m<sup>2</sup> internal space) impossible. Even if the site was unconstrained the location of the facilities proposed at the new sites in an intensively used town centre is impractical – the Artificial Grass Pitch at Oak Park is 8,000m<sup>2</sup> alone.
- 3.8 Similarly the age, construction and configuration of Gala Baths make refurbishment costly. An initial survey (October 2009) suggested a full modernisation to address the limitations of the existing facility outlined in paragraph 3.6 above and bring the centre up to modern standards would cost in the region of £10m to £11m. A smaller scale improvement scheme to include a moving pool floor and boom, flume slides, village changing and café area would cost in the region of £1m.
- 3.9 The petition highlights the importance that local residents place on the Gala Baths’ Brine Pool. Though the brine pool is an extremely popular facility and unique in the region, there is nothing technically remarkable about the provision. A brine pool is essentially a regular pool with warmer water (33 degC / 91.4 degF against the Gala’s 29 degC / 84.2 degF) to which salt has been added. In the event that the Gala Baths complex was not to have a long-term future, a replacement brine pool could be provided at one of the proposed new centres, or any of the existing pools could be retrofitted to provide a brine pool.

#### **4. Financial implications**

The council is using allocated existing funding to assess a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. All options will be assessed with respect to their financial implications and affordability. This will be against the Medium Term Financial Plan draft budget saving proposals to meet a balanced budget for the Council for 2014/15.

#### **5. Legal implications**

Whilst there is no statutory obligation on the council to provide leisure centres per se, there remains an obligation to provide adequate recreational, social and physical facilities for school purposes.

## **6. Property implications**

The Council is exploring a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. The property implications for each option shall be fully assessed as part of this process.

## **7. Staffing implications**

The Council is exploring a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. Any future proposals that have staffing implications would include the full consultation of any affected staff.

## **8. Equality implications**

The Council is exploring a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. Any future proposals will be subject to a detailed Equality Impact Assessment.

## **9. Consultation**

The Council is exploring a range of options for the future of Gala Baths and the other leisure centres. Any future proposals will be subject to consultation commensurate with the proposals.

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