

Minutes

Economic Scrutiny Panel

19th February 2008, Newton Hall Community Centre

Present: Councillor Colledge (in the Chair) and Councillors, Guy, Kelly, Marsden, Plews, Simmons, Simpson, Stoddart and Wilkes

Also Present: Councillor: Kellett

Deborah Holmes – Leisure Development Manager, Environment & Leisure Services, City of Durham

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Bartle, Hopgood and Lightley

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22nd January, 2008 were agreed as a true record.

3. Review of Scrutiny of Leisure Services

Deborah Holmes, Leisure Development Manager, City of Durham was in attendance to bring Members up to date with the progress of Leisure Services in relation to the Leisure Services 5 Year Plan.

Note: *Councillor Moderate entered the meeting at 5.35 p.m.*

A question from Councillor Moderate relating to the difference between the fees for Membership to Leisure Centres, i.e. Abbey Leisure Centre in comparison to the other Centres. This question had been raised at the Scrutiny Committee held 7th February 2008. This question was referred to the Economic Scrutiny Panel, and a copy was attached to the agenda papers and forward to Leisure Services in advance of the meeting.

The Leisure Development Manager explained that the price differential was due to the fact that Abbey Leisure Centre offered enhanced facilities in comparison with the City of Durham's other Leisure Centres. These includes a larger overall capacity, extra equipment (generally newer and of a higher quality) and a Sauna and Steam facility. Indeed, results from a Customer Satisfaction Survey showed that the Sauna and Steam facility was a major factor people considered when joining.

Whilst there is a desire to equalise the fees across all of the Leisure Facilities, it would need to be in tandem with works to bring all the facilities to the same standard of provision.

Some Members noted that Abbey Leisure Centre did have enhanced facilities in comparison to the other Centres, and understood the original reasons for the price differential.

Councillor Moderate raised the point that if all the facilities offered different levels of provision, should each Centre have its own price structure. The Leisure Development Manager informed Members that many gym members use more than one facility i.e. an individual may wish to use a centre near to the place of work on a lunchtime, but use a facility closer to home on an evening.

If each Centre an individual fee schedule, then this flexibility (an advantage that the City of Durham facilities have over the private sector and a major selling point for memberships) would be prevented. If a person wished to use Abbey Leisure Centre and the other Centres, they would need to pay the higher fee.

Councillor Moderate also noted that the construction of Abbey Leisure Centre was paid for by "Community Gain" rather than directly from taxpayers, and therefore should the gain for the Community not be to have the facility priced equally with other Centres. Councillor Moderate suggested that would it not be a fairer system to have a standard fee schedule for "core services" and then services specific to each centre be charged accordingly.

The Leisure Development Manager noted this, but reiterated that there is still a desire to equalise prices across all the Leisure Centres (except the new Freemans Quay Leisure Centre, which will have its Fitness Suite operated by a private company, Competition Line) and therefore works would be continuing to move towards this. Also, it was again noted that to reflect the price differential Abbey Leisure Centre offered a better membership package compared to other local facilities. Due to the ongoing process of Local Government Review (LGR), there cannot be a definitive timescale attached to the process of equalising fees.

Members wondered whether there was a possibility of having a price freeze on the Passport for Leisure scheme for older people, as these fees have increase and this may affect the take up of the scheme. The Leisure Development Manager noted this, but indicated that there were currently no plans for such a freeze. However, the "Healthy Horizons" scheme for the over 55 year olds has received £180,000 to continue class provision in the community. Funding received through the Durham Primary Care Trust allows for a substantially lower charge than the standard activity fee in the centres so this is an alternative option for that age group.

Members were keen to know if the Leisure Development Manager had any thoughts on what may happen to the Leisure Centres should the LGR process lead to a Unitary Authority for County Durham. The Leisure Development Manager did not wish to speculate as regards to any changes that may or may not take place, but noted that Officers within the City of Durham's Environment and Leisure Services Department were involved in the work streams currently ongoing that would be the basis for any plans for a new Unitary Authority. Members were asked to note that the City of Durham's Leisure Centre had the highest participation rates in the region, and indeed the figures were in the upper quartile nationally and it was hoped this would be an important factor in considering plans for the future.

The Leisure Development Manager had further information relating to performance of Leisure Services, and these would be circulated to Members accordingly and placed on Members Online for those Members not on the Panel.

4. Any Other Business

There were no further items raised for discussion.

The meeting terminated at 6.00 p.m.