

## **NOTES OF A SITE VISIT TO SEAHAM AND PETERLEE LEISURE CENTRES**

### **UNDERTAKEN BY THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**ON FRIDAY 17 AUGUST 2007 AT 10.00 AM**

Present: Councillor C Patching (Chair)  
Councillors B Burn and R Burnip

Also Present: M Grinstead – Leisure Connections  
N Gedney – Leisure Connections (Seaham only)  
S Arkley – Head of Neighbourhood Initiatives (Seaham)  
P Irwin – Senior Cultural Development Officer (Peterlee)  
S Gwilym – Scrutiny Support Manager

#### **Monitoring of the Leisure Facilities contracted out to Leisure Connections**

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the visit the purpose of which was to assess the quality of the services provided at Seaham and Peterlee Leisure Centres. Reference was made to the last report given by the Senior Cultural Development Officer to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee on Leisure Partnership arrangements. In receiving the report, the Committee had agreed that both Leisure Centres be visited during the summer holiday period.

Members first visited Seaham Leisure Centre. Before entering the Leisure Centre, some discussion took place regarding playing field usage. M Grinstead indicated that whilst Leisure Connections were responsible for the playing fields, their maintenance was undertaken by the District Council on a sub-contract basis. There were currently 7 football teams who used the football pitches and Leisure Connections had actively marketed these facilities in an attempt to increase usage and income arising from this. Members were informed however that this was not easy, particularly in view of the fact that the Leisure Centre competed with local schools for football facilities. Reference was made to issues raised by a local Councillor regarding anti-social behaviour in and around the 'underpass' at the far side of the fields. M Grinstead acknowledged that this issue had been raised with the company and they worked with the District Council's Street Wardens to try to alleviate this problem.

On entering Seaham Leisure Centre, it was noted that the LSPTV facility was prominently displayed which included leisure facilities available at both Seaham and Peterlee Centres. M Grinstead indicated that there were two squash courts within the District and that demand for these had reduced dramatically during the last ten years.

Members then viewed the fitness suite at Seaham. M Grinstead reported that Leisure Connections had changed their supplier of gymnasium equipment and that both Leisure Centres would be refurbished with new kit. Membership of the fitness club stood at 350 with special offers being promoted for 'short-term' membership which the company hoped would lead to longer term membership options being taken up.

Discussion took place regarding the sauna/physio facilities at the centre. In highlighting usage patterns, M Grinstead indicated that there were no 'mixed' sessions and that the facilities were generally used more frequently by men. He explained that usage was comparable with other similar facilities provided in local authority leisure facilities. He acknowledged however that those users who were

'members' of the leisure centres generally expected/demand better service standards than casual users.

Members then viewed the Club Room and Bar area. M Grinstead advised that Leisure Connections had identified that the bar area was in need of refurbishment. This had been put on hold pending the transfer of the existing bar and catering concessions to a new provider. Members were assured that the new arrangements would provide better services. In discussing the bar and catering services provided at the Leisure Centres, reference was made to recent concerns raised by Members that the bar prices seemed too high when compared to nearby facilities. M Grinstead indicated that although Leisure Connections were a national company with a national pricing policy, account was taken of local circumstances when fixing bar prices. He stressed that the company tried to balance the need for affordability with the need to make profits.

The issue of having a competitive pricing policy also applied to the pricing of leisure facilities. M Grinstead explained that with the availability of facilities in local schools, the company had lowered its prices for five-a-side football to retain customers.

M Grinstead acknowledged that there had been a decline in demand for the Seaham Leisure Centre as a 'function venue' due to the Glebe Centre, Murton. However, he had established mechanisms to contact past customers to promote the facilities on offer. He had also contacted local businesses with 14 or more employees to promote corporate leisure cards.

During the discussion which followed, Councillor Patching referred to the changing nature of Seaham as a town. An influx of new residents, new investment and the redevelopment of Seaham Hall meant that the District Council and Leisure Connections would have to work smarter to attract new customers.

Whilst noting the investment made by the Council in the Seaham Leisure Centre, the time appeared to be right to examine the options available for providing improved leisure facilities in the town. M Grinstead reported that during the course of the existing partnership arrangements, the Leisure subsidy had reduced from £850,000 to £500,000. He suggested that this may be reduced further with the right type of redevelopment.

Councillor Patching referred to the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme being promoted by the Government and the opportunities that this may present for improved leisure facilities for Seaham linked to increased Community Development and investment.

Members then departed Seaham Leisure Centre. In doing so, concern was expressed at the lack of signage from the local roads identifying Seaham Leisure Centre.

Upon arriving at Peterlee Leisure Centre, Members noted that there appeared to be considerably more children in attendance at the Centre. M Grinstead suggested that this was due in part to the demand for the swimming pool and also the 'free swims for kids' initiative which had been promoted.

Discussion then took place regarding the Leisure Saver Card and promotional material was provided for Members' information. The information provided details of the savings that could be made from joining the scheme as well as the terms and conditions of eligibility for the scheme. Members also noted the information that would be obtained from the application forms and also from the leisure cards themselves in respect of patterns of usage.

In viewing the leisure pool area, Members noted that an area of the main pool had been 'laned-off'. M Grinstead advised that this had been done to allow for staff to undertake refresher training for lifeguard duties. The remainder of the pool was being used for an 'AquaFit' session.

During an inspection of the sauna facilities, Members noted that solariums had been reinstalled. M Grinstead advised that press reports and health advice had led to these facilities being removed approximately 2-3 years ago. However, contrary advice had been received and due to customer demand, these facilities had been reintroduced. Members noted, however, that health and safety advice regarding tanning machinery was prominently displayed.

Members inspected the changing facilities and were pleased with both the cleanliness and condition of the locker areas with most of the lockers having wrist straps attached to the keys.

Members then viewed the Harpers Gymnasium suites. There were a dozen or so patrons in the gym and all of the equipment was in working order. M Grinstead referred Members' attention to some new gymnasium equipment that had been specifically designed and installed to enable disabled patrons to use the facilities.

In discussing promotional activities undertaken by Leisure Connections, M Grinstead reported that towards the end of September an 'end of Summer Sale' was to be promoted which offered free group activities, 'Swimfit' classes and special rates for daily gym usage. These offers would be promoted on a similar basis to that described during the Seaham visit i.e. canvassing ex-users and local businesses.

Reference was made to the ability of the Leisure Centres to attract major regional events. M Grinstead stated that events such as boxing and snooker were being pursued but he acknowledged that such events were often lost to Crowtree Leisure Centre, Sunderland.

In response to a Member's question, M Grinstead reported that the 'Little Stars' pre-school group no longer used the Leisure Centre as a base because it was not financially viable. It was hoped that the room that they previously occupied could be marketed as an Under 5's play area for private functions.

Discussion then turned to the management of the Leisure Centres and specifically the number of staff working at the facilities. M Grinstead acknowledged that staffing numbers had reduced at the two Leisure Centres and that management practices at the Centres had been revised to improve the efficiency of the operation. He explained that he was required by Leisure Connections to identify three areas of poor performance upon which to focus and bring about improvements. The company's performance management systems included targets for both Seaham and Peterlee Leisure Centres. The current areas identified for improvement were:-

- Fitness Classes (Use of the Gymnasium)
- Swimming attendances
- Sports Hall usage

Members asked about the capacity amongst Leisure Connections to develop new initiatives which may build on cyclical trends in activities for young people such as 'wheelies', self defence classes etc. M Grinstead indicated that the company were always looking for new initiatives that could increase attendances and income in the

Centres. He pointed out however that the Leisure Centres faced increasing competition for such activities from other community facilities.

Reference was made to the proposed refinancing process within Leisure Connections and it was anticipated that the company would invest in future services upon completion of this refinancing exercise. Members also discussed the condition of the existing Leisure Centres, the proposed maintenance work to be undertaken and the options available for future service development either within existing facilities or alternative models.

The Scrutiny Support Manager asked whether the recent announcement regarding the future of Local Government in County Durham would have an impact upon the potential refinancing/reinvestment by the company. The Senior Cultural Development Officer reported that the existing arrangements were covered within the agreed contract between Leisure Connections and the District Council. Any changes to these arrangements would be subject to a renegotiation of this contract.

The Chair of the Committee then thanked M Grinstead for the visit and stated that the notes of the meeting would be prepared for consideration by the Community Services Scrutiny Committee at a future meeting.

**RESOLVED** that the Community Services Scrutiny Committee consider feedback from the site visits at a future meeting.