

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 November 2022

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Town Hall, Bexhill-on-Sea on Monday 28 November 2022 at 6:30pm.

Committee Members present: Councillors P.N. Osborne (Chair), J. Barnes, Mrs M.L. Barnes (Substitute), J.J. Carroll, C.A. Clark, S.J. Coleman, P.C. Courtel, P.J. Gray, K.M. Harmer (ex-officio), C.A. Madeley, C.R. Maynard, M. Mooney and R.B. Thomas (Substitute).

Other Members present: Councillors R.K. Bird (remote), A.S. Mier, G.F. Stevens and H.L. Timpe.

Advisory Officers present: Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Director – Place and Climate Change and Democratic Services Officer.

Also present: Chief Executive Officer of Freedom Leisure, Regional Manager Freedom Leisure, Area Manager Freedom Leisure, Mayor of Rye, 18 members of the public in the Council Chamber and 50 members via the live webcast.

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### OSC22/39. **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs V. Cook (Vice-Chair), Mrs D.C. Earl-Williams and the Head of Neighbourhood Services.

It was noted that Councillors Mrs M.L. Barnes and R.B. Thomas were present as substitutes for Mrs V. Cook and Mrs D.C. Earl-Williams respectively.

### OSC22/40. **DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**

Declarations of interest were made by Councillors in the Minutes as indicated below:

Maynard      Agenda Item 4 – Personal Interest as Executive Member of East Sussex County Council.

### OSC22/41. **TEMPORARY CLOSURE OF RYE SWIMMING POOL - VERBAL UPDATE**

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;
- the RDC representative on the East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board would raise the issue with the Board;
- in addition to the installation of solar PV panels, heat pumps and the replacement of gas with hydrogen could also be considered;
- RDC had quarterly meetings with senior managers of FL to monitor its management contract (RDC had a lease with East Sussex County Council for the building which was due to expire in 2026, at the same time as the management contract with FL);

- central Government should be contacted via the local MPs as support was needed for the public leisure sector post April 2023, in order to keep open important community health and well-being services; and
- Members recommended that Cabinet be requested to consider that the Council continued to work with FL and RTC to explore options and that a report be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the new year outlining the options available and their financial implications.

**RESOLVED:** That Cabinet be requested to consider that:

- 1) RDC continue to work with Freedom Leisure and Rye Town Council to explore options; and
- 2) a report be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the new year outlining the options available and their financial implications.

(Councillor Maynard declared a Personal Interest in this matter as an Executive Member of East Sussex County Council and in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct remained in the meeting during the consideration thereof).

**CHAIR**

The meeting closed at 8:26pm