

Council 19 October 2023

Schedule of Public Questions

The following questions have received a written response as the questioner was not present at the meeting. Please see the minutes of the meeting for the public questions asked and answered at the meeting.

No.	Question from/to	Question
1.	From RW to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	On Friday 29th October at 2.30pm we former workers of Aspire were made redundant and we now have only been guaranteed an interview for any job. How would you on the council feel if you were told one day you are made redundant for no reason of your own then told to reapply for your job then be told you were not good enough for that job?
Response:		
<p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months. The new provider will have a wide range of jobs available and will definitely require skilled and knowledgeable staff to run the facilities in future. The Council has told those companies interested in this contract that staff recently made redundant by Aspire should be guaranteed interviews.</p> <p>So far, all of the shortlisted providers have indicated that they are committed to doing this. They recognise the skills and talents and commitment of former staff and they have warmly embraced the opportunity to interview staff.</p>		
2.	From KW to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	I have read that the request by GCC to Aspire for a 1-year extension to continue running the facilities had been 'on the table' since early this year. From what I have read GCC put too much faith/trust that Aspire would continue and that belief then caused GCC to be caught out. Aspire had not signed any agreement to extend beyond 30/9/23 so surely this should have raised doubts even concerns that Aspire would continue - therefore why didn't GCC have a contingency plan for Aspire continuing not to sign the extension agreement?
Response:		
<p>The Council began negotiating with the Aspire Trust over a contract extension in March 2022. In July 2022, the Council and the Trust agreed a Partnership Delivery Plan for that 12-month contract extension period, and an associated management fee for that period.</p>		

	<p>In early 2023 the Trust then told the Council that it did not believe it could continue to trade for that period, and shared business plans and forecasts setting out the additional amount of support it believed it needed to continue. The Council agreed in principle to provide this additional level of funding requested, and believed that it had reached an in-principle agreement with the Trust to continue on that basis. However, the Board of Trustees decided on September 26th not to continue to provide leisure services and to enter into liquidation.</p>	
3.	<p>From KW to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources</p>	<p>I was under the impression that some Councillors were still on the Aspire Directors Board? Obviously anyone sitting on the Board have a first duty of responsibility to Aspire and not to GCC however surely they must have had an opinion on whether Aspire were going to continue and could have indicated to GCC?</p>
<p>Response:</p>		
<p>At the end of September, two current Councillors were on the Board of the Aspire Trust.</p> <p>Any Trustees have a legal duty of responsibility towards that Trust on which they serve, and this may include duties in relation to maintaining confidentiality of board discussions and decision making.</p> <p>The Council understands that the Board of Trustees took a decision to terminate its contract to run these facilities at a Board meeting on September 26th. The Council was privately informed of this decision on September 27th and was asked to keep this information private and confidential until the Trust could inform its employees, which it did on Friday 29th September.</p>		
4.	<p>From LS to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure</p>	<p>We must have a leisure centre in Gloucester in the city centre. So many different people used GL1 from all abilities and backgrounds. It must be reopened for all to use. When can this be expected? A year is much too long to be without this facility.</p>
<p>Response:</p>		
<p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September. Currently a phased reopening of facilities at Oxstalls and GL1 has commenced, with usage of external grass, 2G, 3G and 4G pitches resuming, and Gloucester City Swimming Club restarting training sessions at GL1</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to fully reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months. The Council hopes to appoint this interim service provider by the end of the month. It is looking for that operator to mobilise as soon as possible after appointment.</p>		

5.	From RL to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	The council officers dealing with the new contract must have been aware of Aspire's concerns regarding funding and their reservations about the additional year contract. If they weren't aware why not?
Response:		
<p>The Council began negotiating with the Aspire Trust over a contract extension in March 2022. In July 2022, the Council and the Trust agreed a Partnership Delivery Plan for that 12-month contract extension period, and an associated management fee for that period.</p> <p>In early 2023 the Trust then told the Council that it did not believe it could continue to trade for that period, and shared business plans and forecasts setting out the additional amount of support it believed it needed to continue. Following an independent review of the Aspire Trust's request and business plans the Council agreed in principle to provide this additional level of funding requested, and believed that it had reached an in-principal agreement with the Trust to continue on that basis. However, the Board of Trustees decided on September 26th not to continue to provide leisure services and to enter into liquidation.</p>		
6.	From RL to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	Why couldn't the council have reassured Aspire that the funding was assured or have worked together with Aspire on finding any shortfall? This would presumably have averted Aspire from pulling out.
Response:		
<p>The Council has held regular management meetings with Aspire Trust throughout the duration of its management contract with the Council.</p> <p>The Council has provided significant financial and other support to the Aspire Trust, totalling over £1.5m since 2019, as it sought to help the Trust deal with challenges such as Covid and rising utility costs.</p> <p>The Council began negotiating with the Aspire Trust over a contract extension in March 2022. In July 2022, the Council and the Trust agreed a Partnership Delivery Plan for that 12-month contract extension period, and an associated management fee for that period.</p> <p>In early 2023 the Trust told the Council that it did not believe it could continue to trade for that contract extension period without further financial support, and shared business plans and forecasts setting out the additional amount of support it believed it needed to continue. Following an independent review of the Aspire Trust's request and business plan, the Council agreed in principle to provide this additional level of funding requested, and believed that it had reached an in-principle agreement with the Trust to continue on that basis. However, the Board of Trustees decided on September 26th not to continue to provide leisure services and to enter into liquidation.</p>		

7.	From GD to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	What will happen to the 150 brilliant members of staff who are out of a job without any explanation from Aspire and when will the city council mismanagement of this situation be resolved? GL1 cannot be allowed to remain closed as it offers so much for its schools and members.
Response:		
<p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months. The new provider will have a wide range of jobs available and will definitely require skilled and knowledgeable staff to run the facilities in future. The Council has told those companies interested in this contract that staff recently made redundant by Aspire should be guaranteed interviews.</p> <p>So far, all of the shortlisted providers have indicated that they are committed to doing this. They recognise the skills and talents and commitment of former staff and they have warmly embraced the opportunity to interview staff.</p>		
8.	From TT to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	Why is the council subcontracting out such an important service? Where was the supplier oversight and where was the oversight the company's finances?
Response:		
<p>Two years ago, the Council commenced a procurement process to secure a leisure services provider from the expiry date of the contract with the Aspire Trust. The Council obtained the support of an expert leisure consultancy SLC to advise on procurement options and strategy. The options appraisal was considered at a Cabinet meeting on 4 May 2022, and recommended that the best sourcing option for the Council would be to procure a new leisure contract from an external provider. The appraisal identified that insourcing this service would be significantly the most expensive option for the taxpayer, and would not deliver any service benefits.</p> <p>The Council has held regular management meetings with Aspire Trust throughout the duration of its management contract with the Council. As a registered Charity, the Trust was also required to submit audited accounts and other information to the Charity Commission, and these are available on the Charity Commission's website.</p>		
9.	From TT to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	You knew the contract was coming to an end - what action was being taken to secure a replacement?
Response:		
The Council was surprised and disappointed by the decision of the Aspire Trust to cease to manage these facilities and to enter into liquidation.		

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10.	From TT to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	What is being done to get this very important facility back open?
<p>Response:</p> <p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months. The Council hopes to appoint this interim service provider by the end of the month. It is looking for that operator to mobilise as soon as possible after appointment.</p>		
11.	From LH to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	Why will it take till January to fully open the pools and GL1 when you have experienced staff who can run the building?
<p>Response:</p> <p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months. The Council hopes to appoint this interim service provider by the end of the</p>		

	<p>month. It is looking for that operator to mobilise as soon as possible after appointment.</p> <p>In advance of that, the Council has reopened the pool for Gloucester City Swimming Club to resume training sessions from Monday 16th October.</p>	
12.	From LH to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	What measures will the council put in place to stop this from happening again?
Response:		
<p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p> <p>As part of that work, the Council is seeking to procure a new interim leisure services operator to reopen and manage the facilities for the next 12-18 months.</p> <p>The Council is also progressing the procurement of a longer-term leisure services operator to manage these facilities.</p> <p>This has been a particularly challenging few years for the leisure sector, as people were slow to return after Covid to indoor leisure facilities. Increases to the minimum wage thresholds has pushed up staffing costs. And the impact of the rise in energy costs has been huge, as the consumption of energy to run facilities – particularly swimming pools - is very high. Several other leisure operators have also ceased trading in recent years around the country after facing similar challenges.</p> <p>Two years ago, the Council commenced a procurement process to secure a leisure services provider from the expiry date of the contract with the Aspire Trust. The Council obtained the support of an expert leisure consultancy SLC to advise on procurement options and strategy. The options appraisal was considered at a Cabinet meeting on 4 May 2022, and recommended that the best sourcing option for the Council would be to procure a new leisure contract from an external provider.</p>		
13.	From LH to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	Why didn't the council step in on the 27th when they were first made aware of the issues with Aspire and Why was another provider not sought out (or at least further along in the process) before the end of the Aspire contract, bearing in mind the reported accounts in early 2023.
Response:		
<p>The Council was surprised and disappointed by the decision of the Aspire Trust to cease to manage these facilities and to enter into liquidation.</p> <p>The Council began negotiating with the Aspire Trust over a contract extension in March 2022. In July 2022, the Council and the Trust agreed a Partnership Delivery Plan for that 12-month contract extension period, and an associated management fee for that period.</p>		

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14.	From GN to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	<p>Why was there no contingency for the contract of GL1 other than Aspire to take it on for one more year before going out to tender? It is a real shame that the leisure centre has closed as it was a hub of activity and a place for people to keep fit, especially those who can't afford other options. I would like to see GL1 reopened as soon as possible.</p>
Response:		
<p>The Council is working hard to get the leisure facilities reopened as soon as possible following the surprising and disappointing decision of Aspire Trust to close them at the end of September.</p>		
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Response:		
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15.	From BB to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure	<p>I believe not only Aspire trust but the council need fully investigating, are both willing to comply with such investigations?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>The Council is a democratic and transparent organisation, open to scrutiny through established legislative processes, and is accountable to the electorate.</p> <p>The Aspire Trust is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. As a registered charity it is accountable to the Charity Commission.</p>