

## **Leisure update report for Overview and Scrutiny meeting – 5 Feb 2024**

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Date: 25 Jan 2024

### **Background**

1. Until September 2023 The Aspire Sports and Cultural Trust was contracted to provide sporting and leisure opportunities and to operate the Council-owned facilities at GL1 Leisure Centre and Oxstalls Sports Park. As noted in the council report in October 2023, Aspire Trust ceased to operate the facilities from 30<sup>th</sup> September. The Trust formally entered the liquidation process on 10 November 2023. Delegated authority to procure an interim provider was granted by council at an extraordinary meeting held on 19 October 2023.

### **Activity since September 2023**

2. Since 1 October 2023 the council took over the management of the council-owned leisure facilities and working with University of Gloucestershire, facilitated the temporary use of some of the pre-booked activities at Oxstalls Sports Park and the Arena. This enabled some of the regular clubs in the city to retain their training schedules with a minimal period of disruption. The council enabled one club access to the swimming pool for training at GL1. A regional swimming gala event took place over a weekend facilitated by the council events team and members of the club, with the support of contractors and partners. This ensured that a key event in the county's sporting calendar was honoured and the club was able to train in the lead up to the event.
3. Council officers and University colleagues were able to reopen their facilities to some of those regular clubs that required minimal external support to operate. Grass pitches at Oxstalls were reopened and made available to pre-booked clubs by the weekend 7 Oct 2023. 2G, 3G and 4G pitches were reopened by the following weekend to pre-existing bookings by regular clubs including hockey, football and rugby. The Council held meetings with representatives from many of the main sporting clubs using these facilities, including the swimming club, to identify ways in which those clubs could resume their use of the facilities (indoor and outdoors). The University was able to reopen its Arena facilities with immediate effect for its own internal teaching uses, to enable that educational provision to continue without disruption, and re-established some community usage of those facilities from 16 October 2023.
4. In parallel to this, Council Officers (working with SLC) worked to appoint a leisure services provider on an interim basis, to bridge the 12–18-month gap until a longer-term provider is procured. Following an initial filtering stage, a small number of interested providers were invited to a tour of the facilities and then asked to submit written proposals. Their proposals were evaluated using the following criteria:
  - The level of overhead and/or profit to be retained by the Operator
  - The level of service / customer offer the Operator proposes to provide within the Council's financial constraints

- The speed, deliverability and robustness of the Operator's mobilisation plans
  - The Operator's track record of delivering high quality services
  - The Operator's overall capacity and resources to support with mobilisation and ongoing contract management
5. Following evaluation of the submissions Freedom Leisure was chosen to provide the interim management of the facilities from 11 November. An agreement was drawn up and a letter of intent served as a guarantee to both parties until a contract could be agreed. The basis of the agreement was taken from the submission provided and the brief set by the council. The overall aim of the interim situation was to re-open the leisure facilities as soon as practicable and safe to do so in order to allow the public, clubs and users of the facilities to return.
  6. An initial mobilisation meeting was held on Monday 30<sup>th</sup> October. This meeting identified a series of actions required and the council and the new operator, based upon their submission. Freedom Leisure mobilised extremely quickly. In line with the wishes of the council, within the first two weeks from the date of appointment their team interviewed over 100 former Aspire staff, appointed 79 staff, provided training, inductions and contracts and were able to re-open the facilities to the public on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November for the majority of sports and leisure activities available. See Appendix 1 - the Partnership report from Freedom Leisure.
  7. To ensure that a strong working relationship was built between the council and the leisure provider, weekly meetings were established from 30<sup>th</sup> October. Since January, meetings have taken place on a fortnightly basis, alternating between a focus on Operational matters and Financial and Business performance. Monthly reports are presented and discussed and performance is monitored.
  8. An interim contract has been drawn up based upon the Sport England standard contracts – based upon best practice for the leisure industry. This agrees the management fee that the council will pay to the operator and is capped at a level that is beneath the agreed budget approved by Cabinet.
  9. Since operating the facilities Freedom Leisure have conducted visible marketing activity and offers. The town crier has been employed to promote and a series of public membership deals and offers have been issued, announced via the press and advertised using digital channels. Where possible, former members and regular users of the facilities have been contacted to encourage them to return.
  10. The former Aspire Leisure Trust entered liquidation process on 10 November 2023 following a creditors agreement to formally appoint Crowe UK as the liquidators. The council as a creditor and is awaiting the outcome of the process to understand whether it will receive any recompense from this.

11. A funding bid to Sport England's Swimming Pool Support Fund (Phase II – Capital) was submitted in October with the announcement due in early 2024.

### **Next steps**

12. Appendix 2 shows the timeline for procurement of a longer-term leisure provider. An announcement has been published in December to alert the leisure providers nationally that Gloucester is seeking a provider to take on the running of the leisure centres. The formal invitation to tender will be issued in February 2024. A bidder's day will take place on 5<sup>th</sup> March to enable interested operators to visit the facilities and to better understand the opportunity to run the city's facilities.
13. Subject to a successful outcome of the bid to Sport England for capital investment funds from the Swimming Pool Support Fund (Phase II), the council will invest into capital works on improvements to GL1 facilities to implement a series of energy saving measures. These will be delivered in 2024-25 with the benefits of these being seen in future years through reduction in operating costs and energy usage reductions. The measures will contribute towards the council's net-zero targets.

### **Related works**

14. Leisure options appraisal produced in 2022.
15. A fully costed set of Condition Reports of the facilities was commissioned in 2022.
16. Procurement strategy for long-term leisure provision agreed and capital
17. The Gloucester Sports and Physical Activity Strategy (2023 – 2028) was produced with Active Gloucestershire and approved in May 2023 Cabinet. This is now published on the council website.

Appendix 1: Freedom Leisure Performance report Jan 2024

Appendix 2: Timeline for procurement of long-term Leisure provider

Appendix 3: Gloucester Sports and Physical Activity Strategy (2023 – 2028) [Layout 1 \(gloucester.gov.uk\)](https://www.gloucester.gov.uk)