

**DECISION ARISING FROM THE PRESENTATION OF A PETITION IN RELATION
TO SAVING THE BOWLS HALL**

Extract from Minutes of Full Council Meeting on 9 April 2018

87 TO RECEIVE A PETITION - HELP SAVE THE BOWLS HALL

“West Lindsey District Council had been presented with a Petition on Friday 23 February 2018.

The Petition was entitled “Help Save the Bowls Hall” and contained over 400 signatures at that date.

The Petition asked the Council to: -

“Reconsider the closure of the purpose built Bowls Hall which gives so many residents of Gainsborough and the surrounding district the chance to continue their hobby providing exercise mentally and physically, competitiveness, a social life, camaraderie and friendship that the Bowls Club provides”.

The Chairman advised that the matter would now be debated, in accordance with the agreed [Petition Scheme](#) and therefore she welcomed Lead Petitioner, Mr Roy Enever to the meeting and invited him to make his five minute address to Members.

Mr Enever made the following Statement to Council: -

“I am here today on behalf of the West Lindsey Bowls Club, to present a statement in support of the petitions provided to the Council regarding their decision to close the Bowls Hall at the Leisure Centre.

The Bowls Hall has operated at the Leisure Centre since 1990, during which time the Bowls Club has provided its Members with competition, social and emotional well-being and, because of this, it has survived! It provides neutral costs to the Council and satisfies the primary principal which Members agreed to in a new contract.

Members have been misled on sustainability, value for money to taxpayers, usage residency and availability of sites prior to voting on the closure on the Bowls Hall. The Bowls Hall has been used and survived for the last 27 years. It is used all year round, with one of the three rinks being available for public use sessions at all times. 70% of bowls users reside in the District with an age range from 50-90 including many severely disabled users.

There is overwhelming local support from local tax-payers and the Council do not own or control another Indoor Bowls facility. Bowls would

be ranked top of any sports participation list, if the list was changed to those aged 65 years and over. Has there been an audit of all activities at the Leisure Centre to see what's going on there? Do not underestimate the value of social and emotional well-being for Bowls Club Members. We fit in the age bracket, where over a third undergo a severe "later life crisis" including mental health illnesses ranging from anxiety to dementia, diabetes, loneliness often manifesting as agoraphobia and physical health problems, especially in the bones, joints and muscles.

We are tackling these likely disadvantages proactively. We are a fully functioning community. We keep ourselves healthy, engage in competition and teach and learn new skills through our membership. We save the National Health Service vital resources by supporting each other, engaging socially, sharing experiences, looking out for one another and sharing a common purpose. Our life has value and should not be frittered away on some money saving exercise.

We have been excluded from any dialogue in your decision to close the Bowls Hall. You have repeatedly told us there is no need, it's commercial, in confidence. This is not acceptable; it is simply not good enough.

Are you satisfied that you have co-operated fully with us in making the decision to close the Bowls Hall? Have you been open and honest in your actions in reaching the decision? Have you been prepared to give reasons for actions and decisions or have you restricted information when the wider public interest clearly demands it? Have you complied with the Members Code of Conduct?

We still do not know why you decided that the Bowls Hall should be closed over other activities. Edward Leigh MP has given his full support to our objectives. Gainsborough Town Council have recorded their support to us and that it is disappointed at the decision that has been taken to close the facility. They have also respectfully asked for an urgent review of your decision. We believe the original funding from the Sports Council was conditioned with a clause that the Centre had to remain as a sports hall for 30 years, including the Bowls Hall. You will know the significant media attention given to the Council's decision, with on-line and hard copy petitions. Members are reminded that local elections are due to take place next year.

Thank you".

The Chairman thanked Mr Enever for his statement. Before opening the matter for debate, Members were reminded of three options available to them when considering Petitions. These being: -

- Take the action the petitioners have requested
- Not take the action requested for the reasons put forward during debate

- Or commission further investigation into the matter.

Debate ensued with the Leader of the Council making the initial response.

“Thank you for your work on the petition and giving us the opportunity to debate this matter tonight. I understand that you are disappointed with the changes we are planning to make at the Leisure Centre. These kind of decisions are not taken lightly but as a District Council we have to provide services for a wide range of residents across our whole district in a way that provides Value for Money for all our Tax Payers.

When we commissioned this work we set our Officers clear expectations and outcomes to be delivered. These included

- Increasing participation and the reach of the leisure services across the district as a whole
- Providing more opportunities for people across the District to be healthy and active.
- To provide health outcomes to relieve the pressure on our local health services
- The contract to be cost neutral at worst but ideally to generate a revenue to both secure the service and other vital services.

I believe that the current proposal delivers the objectives set at the beginning of the project.

I understand that the team have entered a dialogue with representatives of your club and I would like to ask my colleague Councillor Mrs Sheila Bibb to update the Council on the progress that has been made so far.”

Councillor Mrs Bibb, Chairman of the Prosperous Communities Committee addressed Council and advised that she along with other Members and Officers had met on 3 occasions with the Club so far and discussed the rationale for the Council’s decision. She further indicated that the Council was committed to continuing to engage with the Club and provide alternative provision. To-date a number of solutions had been offered, including, transportation to visit alternative indoor bowls facilities at Dunholme and Scunthorpe at the expense of the Council; and free access to short mat bowls for a year at the Leisure Centre. Furthermore, SLM (the contractor) had offered to purchase bespoke mats which would be comparable to the current rink size.

Council representatives had agreed to continue this dialogue with the Club after this meeting.

The Leader confirmed the provision of such mats emphasising they were extremely close to current specification and size. The offer of 12 months free use of the Centre was also confirmed and thus the Leader was of the view bowling would continue, provision would be continuing and therefore proposed the request of the petitioners be rejected.

Further debate ensued and it was questioned why the current Bowls Hall could not be retained and have alternative flooring laid when it was not in use. This would address the Club's concerns regarding the move to "short-mat bowls" whilst still allowing the wiser usage to be increased. The objectives of the Leisure Contract were not disputed.

The Leader of the Opposition addressed Councillor, making reference to the support shown by Edward Leigh MP, despite West Lindsey Conservatives being responsible for the decision.

A point of information was raised clarifying that Edward Leigh was not the Leader of the West Lindsey Conservatives and that this statement was mis-leading.

The Leader of the Opposition continued his address, this was the largest petition debated and he was of the view that this suggested that the process had gone wrong somewhere. Strong public objection had been demonstrated to the facilities closure not just from the Bowling Club. 2000 had signed the petition and 4000 had viewed the BBC Report. These figures he considered spoke for themselves and without doubt he believed they could have been increased. He therefore urged the Council to listen and review its decision as a matter of urgency.

It was not being suggested that the whole contract be reviewed but the options around the Bowls Hall and its usage. He commended the Club for the way in which they had campaigned and the passion they has shown in trying to retain this important facility. He suggested the Council had to take some level of responsibility for reducing Club numbers, having not invested in Sports Development for the last 10 years. He questioned which other activities would be targeted like this in the future, if usage measures were to be applied. Reference was made to other bespoke sporting facilities which had been lost in the past and this was considered to be at the detriment of sporting excellence being achieved in the District. It was suggested there must be a way to combine the proposed Health and Well-being centre and the current Bowls Club and therefore he proposed that Members support Option 3 and commission further investigation into the issues raised by the Petition.

Further debate ensued and Members spoke of the risks and serious consequences associated with not proceeding with the decision, in view of the contract decision having been awarded. The Council had no alternative contract in place after the 1st of June meaning all services at the Leisure Centre would be at risk. Suspending a contract at such a late stage would also damage the Council's reputation and jeopardise the likelihood of a provider even being found in the future. It was also suggested there would be further legal ramifications and claims for damages creating further financial burden to the Council.

Members questioned the life span of a refurbished rink and when the rink at the Centre was last re-furbished. However Officers did not have this level of detailed information available at the meeting but undertook to provide it outside of the meeting if required.

The Leader again addressed the meeting and reminded Members that the Council had a duty to deliver services across the District. The new contract would deliver a

new facility at Market Rasen, a full refurbishment of the Leisure Centre in Gainsborough and an outreach service. The contract was a multi-million pound investment into the District as whole, this had been well considered and delivered a number of agreed objectives and outcomes.

The Leader was of the view that this demonstrated Members were taking leisure and health provision seriously and it was stressed that Bowls at the Leisure Centre would continue.

With debate drawing to a close, Members stressed that the emotional and social side of the Club did not need to change. There was a commitment to continue dialogue, and an acceptance to understand the differences between the two games to provide a suitable solution to allow the Club to continue.

The petitioners were again congratulated for the passion and determination shown throughout the campaign, although it was questioned that a high number of the petitioners were not from Gainsborough and were not Bowl Club Users.

Continued negotiation, as opposed, to amending the contract was seen as the most practical and pragmatic solution.

The Leader's early proposal to reject action requested by the petitioners was seconded.

It was moved and seconded that any vote taken on the matter be by way of recorded vote.

Following procedural clarification the Monitoring Officer indicated that Councillor Young's written motion under Procedure Rule 10, was a matter of separate debate. The Leader's motion having been duly seconded would move to the vote and if the majority of Members were in favour of rejecting the action requested by the petitioners, as had been proposed, then the other options available would subsequently fall.

Having been proposed and seconded earlier in the meeting, the motion was then put to a recorded vote, having had the earlier request for such also duly seconded.

Votes were cast as set out below:

For: - Cllrs, Allison, Bardsley, Bibb, Bierley, Brockway, Devine, England, Fleetwood, Howitt-Cowan, Lawrence, G McNeill, J McNeill, Mewis, Oaks, Palmer, Parish, Rodgers, Smith, Strange, Summers, Waller, Welburn, White

Against: - Cllrs Boles, Cotton, Darcel, Young

Abstain: - Cllrs Bond

With the majority of Councillors voting in favour of the motion, the motion was declared **CARRIED** and therefore it was **RESOLVED** that the request of the petitioners be rejected.

Mr Enever, as Lead Petitioner, was advised that he would be sent written notice of the decision and also a copy of this would be displayed on the Authority's website.

Note: The majority of petitioners left the meeting following consideration of the above item and prior to the next agenda item being discussed.