



Cheshire East Council Strategic Leisure Review 2023

Sandbach Town Council Consultation Response

Background

Sandbach Town Council welcomes the opportunity to comment, on behalf of its residents, regarding the consultation on potential reductions in local leisure services.

Whilst the Borough Council hasn't yet provided specific proposals on how it will make these reductions, it is currently consulting on the possible approaches & principles to reducing the costs they incur through funding and delivering leisure services as follows:

1. *Focus on providing a smaller number of core larger leisure sites, withdrawing funding from those sites less well attended*
2. ***Focus on providing leisure services in the areas of greatest health need, withdrawing funding from sites which by assessment do not meet a minimum threshold level***
3. *Implement a differential pricing policy for different grades of membership, like a Gold / Silver / Bronze reflecting the range of service offer. This would allow higher cost activities such as swimming provision to be charged at a different unit rate*
4. *Increase prices across all activities and grades of membership*
5. *Reduce opening hours across all leisure sites*
6. *Reduce scope of higher unit rate cost services such as swimming offered across all leisure sites*
7. *Transfer ownership of leisure sites to other third party operators, where an interest is expressed and there is a clear business case to do so*

Impact for Sandbach Community

In Sandbach, the impact of this review is focussed entirely on the **Sandbach Joint Use Leisure Centre**, located at Sandbach School, which serves Sandbach School pupils, as well as the whole community at non school use times.

The Leisure Centre is highly valued by the community and provides a variety of leisure activities through the contracted provider 'Everybody Health Leisure' (EHL) including, crucially, a Swimming Pool. EHL receive a subsidy from CEC and are then expected to balance the books through income generation through commercial practices (improved marketing etc). It is understood that the overall cost of the centre is approximately £250K per annum, £150K of which is attributable to the upkeep of the Pool.

The Centre is in high demand, with a constant waiting list for swimming lessons, and is the only publicly run facility in the area of its kind.

Although Sandbach High School has a swimming pool this is for exclusive school use and is therefore discounted as a community provision for the purposes of this consultation response.

Sandbach Town Council Response to CEC broad proposals

Sandbach Town Council's starting position is that **it strongly opposes any reduction in service or increase in price for the leisure centre** with reasons as follows:

Need:

Cheshire East Council, in its original assessment of leisure facilities, acknowledged that Sandbach had a very strong case, relative to other localities, to retain its current level and access of leisure services due to the 'tartan rug' assessment of needs within wards and impact on health outcomes;

Within this assessment, CEC acknowledged the Sandbach community profile included pockets of deprivation, a large elderly population, and high number of families and children, which required a publicly run leisure centre to ensure that such needs were partially met and that this provision made an essential contribution to preventing further ill health (physical and mental) and deprivation;

Cost:

It is the Town Council's belief that the town requires an affordable and accessible leisure centre which is open to low income families and other vulnerable groups;

Further, the current EHL 'options' scheme for those less able to afford private club memberships etc., should be retained or improved. It is noted also that this has already been limited and now appears to exclude ex service personnel which the Council strongly advises should be reinstated;

In addition, the joint use leisure centre is the only facility of its kind in this locality which allows 'pay as you go' fitness facilities, which again benefits lower income groups and encourages spontaneous use of leisure services;

Operating Model:

The concept of the creation of the trust, 'Everybody Health Leisure' was to remove the risk of providing such services from the public sector and ensure that a more commercial approach would be taken to marketing and investment of facilities. Although the Town Council acknowledges that this has been achieved to some degree, it should be explored further with demonstration of more imaginative and innovative solutions to improving the profitability and use of these services;

The Town Council welcomes the fact that the gym within the leisure centre has recently been refurbished and that it would be a waste of resources if this were somehow to be removed from general public access;

Asset Transfer:

The Town Council understands asset transfer is a legitimate option, but feels that this approach would not work in these circumstances of joint use with the School and wider community and would ultimately (and permanently) reduce valuable and accessible public services from public access;

Preventive Health and Social Care Services:

Leisure services are provided to improve all aspects of health, and in turn reduce the need for additional health and social care services down the line. In times of rising obesity, vascular disease, diabetes Councils should be investing in preventive services to address these trends and their predominance in lower income groups.

Summary:

There is a high demand for all facilities within Sandbach Leisure Centre, demonstrated through waiting lists for childrens' swimming lessons, high fitness & other class sign up and overused parking provision, and any reduction in service or increase in price would adversely affect the quality of life of residents and inevitably their overall health outcomes.

As a result of these comments the Town Council **rejects all the approaches to addressing the resourcing issues it faces in leisure services for all except number (2)** set out in bold above:

'focus on providing services in the areas of greatest health need withdrawing funding from certain sites which by assessment do not meet a minimum threshold level'

Sandbach Town Council Resources

Subject to the response to the consultation and the outcome of the review, it is possible that the Town Council could be asked to contribute to the future survival of these facilities. The public will be aware that over recent months, as Cheshire East Council seeks to balance its budget by reducing the services it funds, the Town Council has been approached for many such requests to plug gaps in various vital service areas.

Whilst the Town Council is strongly against the reduction and / or removal of any of its public services, it is not of a size and scale to fund a large number of additional services, which have been historically been funded by the Borough, without, of course, significantly increasing its precept and Band D equivalent Council Tax for all its residents in the medium to long term. This puts the Town Council in a difficult (and historically unique) situation which needs serious consideration going forward. Whilst the Town Council has a well managed and sound financial base, such demands are unsustainable realistically for a relatively small organisation.

Messages for Residents & Users – Save Our Centre!

Overall, there is a very strong case for retaining the Sandbach Leisure Centre, which has been recognised by Cheshire East Council itself.

But the most compelling case to keep the Centre is made by continued and increasing use of all its services by its residents. So, please, not only respond to this consultation in great numbers also sign up for the Leisure Centre or use some of its services – there is currently an offer for 12 months for the price of 9 – make the most of it if you can!

Ceri Lloyd

Sandbach Town Council Chief Officer - On behalf of Sandbach Town Council

(Approved delegation for response based on Council resolution 6 December 2023)

27 December 2023

Consultation Deadline 7 January 2024