

Dimensions Splashpool

Submission on 3rd April 2008

From Joan Walley MP

Summary

The decision of Stoke-on-Trent council to refer the petition signed by over 5,500 people objecting to the closure of Dimensions splashpool to the communities overview and scrutiny committee chaired by Councillor Conway provides the opportunity for the council, partners, stakeholders and constituents to consider in detail the wider policy framework within which Dimensions operates and reconsider the policy of closure of the splashpool. This framework allows further consideration of the role of Dimensions within the wider context of Local Area Agreement targets, Government policy and alternative funding sources.

My Recommendation(s)

I would support a detailed appraisal of the role of Dimensions, including retention of the splashpool, in relation to an overall sports and activity strategy for the city which drives regeneration, improves health, reduces crime and helps the achievement of LAA targets. The council must make consideration of the wider impact the closure of Dimensions splashpool will have upon Stoke-on-Trent

I would support detailed discussions between the council its strategic partners, Unison trade union and users of the pool to provide channels of communication so we can get a support group for the facilities at Dimensions as a whole.

Key Issues:

Compliance with Local Area Agreement (LAA) - the closure of the splashpool is in direct contravention of the Local Area Agreement targets. These targets are:

Health

- HCOP 2.3 To halt the year on year rise in obesity amongst adults 16-75 years by 2010
- HCOP 2.4 To reduce the number of deaths from Cardio Vascular Disease (heart disease and stroke) in the under 75 year olds
- Halt the year on year rise in obesity levels in schoolchildren under 11

What role does Dimensions splashpool play?

- ✓ "regular exercise can reduce the risk of obesity and illness in general, as well as diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes." (Chief Medical Officer, "5 times a week" 2004)
- ✓ 2000 patients were referred to exercise classes in the splashpool by their GP following illness or surgery
- ✓ The splashpool is a child-centered facility which is important in helping children remain fit and healthy
- ✓ 131,000 people exercised in the pool in 2006-07

Physical Activity

- HCOP 2.7.1 Double the percentage of adults (aged 16-65) participating in at least 30 minutes moderate intensity sport and active recreation (including recreational walking) on 3 or more days per week, as measured by Sport England's Survey
- CYP 3.3 Increase the involvement of young people in sport, recreation and other positive activity by 2008

What role does Dimensions splashpool play?

- ✓ Dimensions is a key outlet facilitating physical exercise. There were:
 - 18,000 swimming lessons the pool
 - 72,499 leisure swims
 - 1,934 exercise classes in the water
- ✓ The pool is used by primary schools, scouts, girl guides, special needs schools and kindergartens to provide exercise to children.
- ✓ The PCT have a Go Five physical activity referral programme to use physical activity as a way of improving health and this includes referrals to Dimensions splashpool

Anti Social Behaviour

- SSC 5.1 To reduce reports of anti social behaviour by 15% by 2008
- CYP 2.1 Reduce levels of anti social behaviour and crime by 20% by 2008
- SSC 1.7 Reduce the number of young people re-offending by 5% by 2008
- SSC 1.7 Reduce the levels of adults re-offending

What role does Dimensions splashpool play?

- ✓ Stanfields Youth Inclusion Project regularly take children to the splashpool in their efforts to reduce anti social behaviour. They believe the closure will adversely affect these efforts
- ✓ Research studies at a local and national level provide evidence that sport contributes to "reducing youth crime and anti-social behaviour" (Sport England)
- ✓ It is the duty of the local authority to give "due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area." (Crime and Disorder Act 1998)

Compliance with Central Government Policy:

Game Plan "to increase significantly levels of sport and physical activity, particularly among disadvantaged groups" (Cabinet Office 02).

Children's Plan "A new national strategy on play will be backed by £225 million over three years, starting early in 2008. Every local area will get extra money by 2010" (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008).

Children's Plan "Parents and young people themselves have told us that they want more safe places for young people to go. Where they can enjoy sports and leisure activities under supervision. There is also evidence to show that this can have a really positive effect on young people's development. We're going to make money available to transform facilities for young people, and we want to involve parents and young people so that their ideas are taken on board"

DCMS "We are committed to providing access to sport and work to encourage the take-up of sport across communities and by children and young people in particular".

Alternative Facilities in Stoke-on-Trent:

It is not right to argue that other facilities can provide the same services following the closure of the splashpool. The splashpool is unique in its focus upon babies and young children. The splashpool has a specialist teaching pool that is very shallow so ideally suited to very young children. There are a number of lessons each designed for different age ranges.

The splashpool provides a very affordable outlet for families to meet and spend time together and is much cheaper than its commercial rivals.

The only comparable facilities are at Fenton Manor swimming pool and this more than 4 miles away, so is not as accessible to people in the northern area. Furthermore, whilst these facilities provide lessons to young children they do not happen nearly as regularly as at Dimensions

Consultation:

There was no public consultation on the closure of what is essentially a public resource despite an extensive consultation exercise about the budget strategy

Resource implications:

Is it possible for council departments and LSP partners to jointly consider what additional funding could be secured to maintain the splashpool?

Dimensions was identified by the City Council's Audit Committee as the ninth most valuable asset held by Stoke-on-Trent City Council (Report of Director of Central Services)

The decision should now be subject to a full financial investigation into all savings and costs including the financial implications associated with the decommissioning of the splashpool

Is it possible for SOTCC with the assistance from Sport England to undergo a review of the operational management and promotion of the centre pool with a view to reduce costs/increase income by £60,000? A combination of marketing, promotion, programming, selective price increases, car parking fee, and assessment of rotas, staffing levels and opening hours may yield the savings the Council needs to balance the books for this financial year and then review the future operation in the light of the sports strategy

I understand and Sport England would be happy to explore this with the council.

Risk Assessment:

What account needs to be taken of penalties incurred if targets are not met; if grants need to be repaid?

What consequences are there if other parts of Dimensions become unviable?

Public Opinion:

The decision to close Dimensions has caused widespread distress and anger and is damaging the council's standing. The popularity of the pool is demonstrated both by the number of signatories on the petition and by the sheer number of people that use the facility

Options for Dimensions Splashpool:

Option A: Close the splashpool as per the council's current decision. I and many of my constituents believe this would be an unfavourable and inequitable option for the many reasons stated above.

Option B: Consider the future of the splashpool within the wider framework of the entire Dimensions facility and of an overall sports and activity strategy which drives regeneration, improves health, reduces crime and helps the achievement of LAA targets. The West Midlands Public Health Observatory identified "that the sport, physical activity and health agenda is being delivered in a largely piecemeal way... The effective good practice and partnership working needs to be developed further, in order for the regions resources to be used to best effect". These sentiments have been echoed by the audit commission which calls "for more assessment of local sporting needs; more partnership working to deliver better-planned and better value for money services; (Public Sports and Recreation Services 2006). It seems clear that Stoke-on-Trent has a real opportunity to heed this advice and

decide upon the future of the splashpool as part of a wider review. I will try to lay out this context below.

Sport England- is currently funding a review of sports facilities in Stoke-on-Trent entitled "City of Stoke Sport and Physical Activity Strategy: Phase 1 Report". This strategy will lay the foundations for sports policy in the long term and will result in increased investment to both new and existing sporting facilities. Before closing the splashpool the council has a duty to consider what funding may be made available from Sport England as a result of their strategy.

The closure of the splashpool may endanger the commercial viability of the other facilities at Dimensions such as football, basketball, table tennis and hockey, so reducing sports facilities in the city further

Lessons in good practice can be derived from Leigh in Lancashire where, in conjunction with local partners, they received £100 million to build a state of the art sports village.

Such a village could be developed in Stoke to include Dimensions, Vale Park, Sproston Park Gymnastics club, Haywood school sports facilities, Stoke-on-Trent FE college, Burslem Park all linked by the constituency.

"sports villages/hubs (must) be recognised as catalysts within the WMES for driving economic growth and regeneration" (Sport England).

Health- "PCT's to provide local leadership, working closely with sport, leisure and transport providers, and develop sustainable, cost effective physical activity strategies in the context of local strategic partnerships- to meet health goals." ("At Least Five Times a Week" Chief Medical Officer 2004)

Explore with the PCT possible funding collaborations with the PCT. The PCT may not be able to directly fund the splashpool but it has offered to consider what auxiliary funding could be provided

The rebuilding of the Haywood hospital is linked to the wider health strategy and to enhanced community health opportunities. Dimensions splashpool is integral to the GP referral scheme and so it makes no sense to close it

Regeneration- "Sport and recreation has an important part to play in regeneration" (Sport England)

A wider sports strategy would have huge benefits for the regeneration of Stoke-on-Trent Liaise with the LSP, the North Staffs Regeneration Company, Burslem Regeneration Company to discuss how to maximise benefits for the area and to utilise possible funding streams

By formulating a coherent, partnership based proposal the city would be more able to draw upon the many streams of Government funding

Crime and Anti Social Behaviour- "sport provides a positive outlet for young people at risk, leading to reduced crime and anti-social behaviour, this in turn will reduce the costs of crime and the negative economic impact caused by fear of crime"

The splashpool must be considered within this context. Work with the police, the Home Office, the LSP to consider methods and funding for maximizing the impact Dimensions can have on reducing anti social behaviour in the wider strategy

Building Schools for the Future- a unique opportunity to improve facilities in the northern cluster

Maximise the joint potential of the community sports facilities at James Brindley, Brownhills, Haywood and St Margaret Ward schools and consider the overall strategy when allocating BSF resource

CONCLUSION

I urge the council to again consider its options on Dimensions splashpool. Its value is clear, as is its popularity. With proper consultation this unique public resource could be developed into a facility that aids the council in achieving its LAA targets and fulfilling its mission statement to "strive for excellence". Such measures would boost the councils standing amongst the public and I am sure that all partners would be delighted to be able to work constructively with the council in making Stoke-on-Trent the city that we all want it to be. For my part I would give my 100% support to working with Stoke-on-Trent city council on such a strategy.