

Scrutiny committee report

Report of head of economy leisure and property

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To: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Abbey Meadows outdoor pool - review of 2013 season

RECOMMENDATION

That the committee considers the report on the 2013 season for the Abbey Meadows outdoor pool.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The report outlines the performance of the outdoor pool and associated interactive water feature and kiosk situated in Abbey Meadow in Abingdon during the 2013 season.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

2. The review of the outdoor pool helps ensure the Vale Council is achieving its strategic objectives in the following areas:
 - excellent delivery of key services: deliver high performing services with particular emphasis on ensuring good quality sports and leisure provision.

BACKGROUND

3. The outdoor pool and associated facilities are managed on behalf of the Vale Council by Soll Vale Ltd (Soll) under a five year contract, which started in 2010 and terminates in 2014. The majority of the revenue funding to operate the facilities comes from a separate

agreement with Abingdon Town Council, which is controlled by a heads of terms document that runs co-terminus with the Soll contract. This report outlines the operational highlights of the facilities' 2013 season.

4. The pool opened to the public on Saturday 25 May 2013 and closed on Sunday 1 September 2013 to maintain the 100 days of public availability that has formed the basis of all contracts since the 1990s. Prior to the opening, Vale Council officers and Soll agreed on works required to prepare the facilities for the season. This year these included Vale Council funded capital works costing £11,500 to repair the pool walkway tiling. Soll commissioned the normal pre opening works required to prepare the facilities for opening.

MONITORING

5. Officers monitored the contract on a weekly basis due to its seasonal nature and the extreme peaks and troughs of usage that are experienced at such facilities, mostly due to prevailing weather conditions. Each visit was unannounced and followed a detailed check list, which was completed by a monitoring officer during each visit. Areas that required immediate improvement were notified to the contractor before the officer left the site and a full report detailing all findings was issued to the contractor within two days of the inspection. An action plan was developed after each inspection with deadlines agreed between the Vale Council and Soll.
6. This report was issued to Soll's general manager of the facility, who was then accountable for distributing that information to the appropriate senior officers within Soll. On the same basis, the monitoring officer reported back on any exceptional items or areas where previously identified items had not been rectified, and these matters were then taken up by the facilities development (leisure) officer with the appropriate Soll counterpart.
7. Whilst there are always issues to deal with, there is co-operation between both Soll and the Vale Council to achieve the desired outcomes. In addition to the unannounced visits, the Vale Council's client officer and deputy clerk of the town council met with Soll's deputy contract manager each week to discuss the facilities' operation.

OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW

8. The season started with changeable weather, which resulted in some periods of high demand and then very few, if any, customers using the pools. This did cause some complaints from users regarding poor standards of cleaning, which were challenged with Soll and rectified. Subsequently, there were very few comments from customers throughout the remainder of the season that required any action from Soll or the Vale Council.
9. Soll has provided free swimming for children under 16 since 2011, as long as they enrol on their registration scheme. This year almost 50 per cent of the attendances were from this category of user and due to the continuation of the offer for a third year the uptake has been the highest yet.
10. During July and early August the hot weather attracted huge demand and pre-booked sessions were introduced so that queuing was kept to a minimum. This worked very well, but the demand could not be met on the hottest days, despite additional sessions being introduced. Towards the middle and end of August the weather deteriorated and consequently the user numbers dropped. This clearly demonstrates the vulnerability of

such outdoor facilities to the weather and it does not take a significant change in climatic conditions to deter people from attending.

11. The snack kiosk offered a very basic menu of drinks, sweets and ice creams. The ability to prepare, store and re-sell fresher food items, either hot or cold, is restricted by the size and condition of the kiosk, which would require significant investment to allow that broader café type of operation to take place. The basic offer appears to satisfy the great majority of users and especially the children who frequent the water feature and pools. The kiosk is an integral part of how the water feature operates, as its major component parts are housed within it.
12. The interactive water feature, which is included within the contract, was completely refurbished for the start of the new season by the Vale Council. Unfortunately, throughout the season, there were minor niggles with component parts, which the installing contractor attempted to replace and towards the end of the season the main pump failed causing over a week's loss of use due to the poor response from the installing contractor. The failure of the facility was due to poor response times by the installing company. These were eventually overcome after significant threats from the Vale Council and when working the feature proved as popular as ever. Unfortunately, the Vale Council is restricted to who it can go to regarding the upkeep of this equipment due to its very specialist nature and that there are only two companies who provide this equipment in the country.
13. Algae proved a large problem throughout the season making the outdoor pool look unappealing. This has been an issue for some years and although the tank is acid and power washed each year the spores collect in the rough surface of the tank and grow in deeper water where there is less foot traffic to remove them. The only answer to this issue is the total replacement of the finished surface of the tank and replacement with a new and different finish. It is important to note that water quality is not compromised in any way by this algae.
14. There were initial difficulties in maintaining cleanliness of the changing areas, especially early in the mornings, but this was resolved by the Soll team after officers had acted in response to customer comments and their own inspection programme. The issue did not re-occur even at the busiest times of the season, although there were times when changing rooms were under severe pressure on the change over times of sessions. Overall, there were only a very few customer comments received by either the district or town council and they referred to the changing accommodation at the start of the season. Soll received a small number of comments primarily from members of the Friends of Abingdon Outdoor Pool regarding water temperature; however, considering the numbers of people attending, the volume of customer comment was very small and the Soll team provided the level of service required by the contract.
15. In regards to water temperature, outdoor pools are by their nature difficult to control as the ambient air temperature has a major impact on the heat loss from the pool water. However, any pool requires a cleaning process to its filters based on the volume of use and the particulate dirt that users bring to the water. This process involves using pool water to backwash its filters and then refill the pool using cold mains water involving several thousands of litres at a time. As this year was busier, this cleaning process was applied more often and in some cases daily, and this made it more difficult to maintain water temperature; however, whenever officers tested the water, it was a minimum of twenty two degrees centigrade as required by the contract.

16. As usual throughout the season there were a number of occasions during the evenings after the pools closed when illegal entry took place by people climbing over the two metre high fences. Soll informed both the police and community support officers who endeavoured to catch and deter such entry throughout the season. Where damage or verbal abuse occurred to the buildings and staff, crime numbers were issued and appropriate actions taken.

USER INFORMATION

17. User figures for the outdoor pools vary significantly depending on the weather, and given the good weather this season the number of visits were the highest since 2006 (when 12,958 visits were recorded). This season, attendances totalled 11,420 and have been compared to the 2012 season in the table found in appendix one to provide some context to the usage of the facility.

18. This year saw some very long periods of hot weather and as a result the pool was operating at maximum capacity all day. However, at the start and end of the season the attendances were much lower as the weather was variable and much wetter.

19. This was the third year that Soll offered free swimming to under 16's who joined up for the free swimming scheme. The result was that almost 50 per cent of attendances were achieved under this category of user, which is to Soll's credit in providing free use. This is reflected in the lower number of paid junior users in 2013 compared to 2012, 850 compared to 2,357, but the under16 pass holders was significantly up from 2,810 in 2012 to 5,699 in 2013. Paid adult usage was up in 2013 to 3,940 on the basis of more prolonged periods of hot weather and presumably carers for children accompanying their charges to attend the outdoor pool. Season pass holders were slightly down on last year, which is thought to be due to the popularity of the pool in the good weather and, therefore, restricting the availability of space to season ticket holders. Access to leisure pass holders increased this year due to Soll actively selling more passes and to the improved weather.

20. The significant monthly variances will be due to the dates of school terms when children were not able to swim during the day, and to when the weather was not at its best; otherwise the pool was on many occasions sold out for the whole day and for days on end, demonstrating it is the weather that is the major controlling factor on usage throughout the season.

21. The season has been from an operational perspective reasonably normal and mirrored the pattern that was expected based on the weather throughout the summer. Soll should be congratulated on maintaining their free swimming for under 16's, which undoubtedly boosted user figures.

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

22. Appendix two contains the confidential operational income and expenditure detail for the outdoor pool, interactive water feature and the snack kiosk. This information is owned by Soll and is in its total control.

23. The Vale Council contributes towards the costs of providing the outdoor pool by:

- providing officer time to manage and monitor the contract with Soll

- providing information to the town council on the preparation, operation and seasonal closure needs of the facilities
- where agreed, providing capital investment towards the upkeep of the buildings and plant.

The average annual cost of this work, excluding capital investment, is approximately £5,000, which is shown in the Vale Council accounts.

CONCLUSION

24. The committee is asked to note the performance of Abbey Meadows outdoor pool and associated facilities during the 2013 season.

APPENDIX 1

2013 ABBEY MEADOWS OUTDOOR POOL USER INFORMATION

	Adult 2012	Adult 2013	Junior 2012	Junior 2013	Concession 2012	Concession 2013	Access to Leisure 2012	Access to Leisure 2013	Under 16's Pass Holder 2012	Under 16's Pass Holder 2013	Season Pass Holder 2012	Season Pass Holder 2013	Total 2012	Total 2013
<u>May</u>	462	138	6	6	11	23	0	0	675	140	35	3	1,189	310
<u>June</u>	208	496	8	19	29	105	4	0	376	768	101	80	726	1,468
<u>July</u>	973	2,416	1,221	601	426	310	4	40	927	3,260	99	108	3,650	6,735
<u>August</u>	852	868	1,108	219	65	158	0	1	812	1,493	79	97	2,916	2,836
September	15	22	14	5	6	2	0	0	20	38	7	4	62	71
Total	2,510	3,940	2,357	850	537	598	8	41	2,810	5,699	321	292	8,543	11,420