

OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

19 JANUARY 2016

Present: Councillor K Crout (Chair)
Councillor S Counter (Vice-Chair)
Councillors J Dhindsa, A Joynes, S Silver and S Williams

Also present: Ian Cook, Gary Foley, Kyle Maundrelle, Karl Miles and Kelly Spencer

Officers: Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services
Corporate, Leisure and Community Client Section Head
Contract Monitoring Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (IS)

28 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/ COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

None were received.

Councillor Martins was absent.

29 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

Councillor Crout declared that he was a member of the centre, but that he had spoken to the Head of Legal Services who had stated that such a membership was not a pecuniary advantage and would not mean that he had to leave the room.

Councillor Counter arrived shortly after the start of the meeting and also declared the she was a member.

30 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2015 were submitted and signed.

31 CONTRACT WITH SLM - OPERATION OF THE LEISURE CENTRES

SLM Contracts Manager gave a short presentation, which outlined the work by SLM within the Watford area and then invited questions from the Committee.

The Chair asked a general question as to the state of the industry in terms of engagement and how SLM were dealing with the rise in "budget" gyms.

The Contracts Manager stated that the low prices had initially affected business, both commercially and in engagement. But because local authority leisure centres had better facilities than the budget gyms, there had now been a growth in membership.

The Area Manager reinforced this statement, saying that people definitely wanted to return to the leisure centres.

Councillor Williams asked if there were any reasons known why people were returning.

The Contracts Manager commented that research was done upon return to establish why. The findings were:

- lack of personal contact
- lack of a perception of safety, particularly female members
- group sessions
- missed the family aspects of a leisure centre

The Area Manager added that SLM had commissioned a specialist gym research company, Gym Metrics, who had carried out the research and provided them with a very detailed report.

Councillor Dhindsa commented that the current situation appeared positive and asked if SLM used any particular criteria to decide upon their pricing. He also asked that with the price increases, was this reflected in pay awards to staff members.

The Contracts Manager replied that membership fees in the centres had not altered during the period of the current contract. However, SLM were price sensitive and inclusive. They conducted competitor analysis before a contract was submitted to an authority.

Additionally, staff colleagues had been rewarded with a 1.5% pay increase in the current year.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head gave an example of another authority and their charging rates. He commented that many authorities charged more than in Watford.

Councillor Collett asked about links with the Woodside Stadium and Watford Harriers.

The General Manager (Woodside) explained that the Harriers were the resident club and there were close links between the club and the centre, with linked websites, mutual attendance at meetings and advertising. The Contracts Manager commented that the centre offered the use of a room, free of charge to the Harriers.

Councillor Joynes asked who set the Sports Development target for SLM.

The Contracts Manager stated that SLM tried to engage with all aspects of the target, with special emphasis on families. The General Manager (Watford) added that SLM promoted and advertised many types of sport.

In response to a question from Councillor Joynes, the General Manager (Woodside) explained that SLM worked not only with Watford Community Housing Trust, but also with a variety of partners such as local schools.

Councillor Joynes asked if people were encouraged to get involved in sport and the use of incentives.

The Area Manager directed the Committee to a leaflet that had been circulated prior to the meeting and explained that this was about opportunities to gain activity points, which in turn led to rewards. He added that SLM were embracing the latest technology, namely activity monitors such as "Fitbits". The use of these allowed an individual to automatically gain activity points, even when exercising away from the centre, providing it was linked to their "Everyone Active" account.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head explained that the community and leisure centres gave a coordinated response via schools and colleges. There was a sports club database, which linked various sports, activities and cultural activities.

Councillor Williams asked about advertising, noting that the young membership was at 9.2%, with a target of 15%. He asked if SLM had considered social media such as Instagram to reach out to younger people.

The Contracts Manager stated that SLM had received requests along similar lines from a variety of sources. Accordingly, SLM had actively looked at increased use of a variety of social media. No date was available yet, but this was an ongoing project.

Councillor Joynes commented that there had been a number of complaints regarding the maintenance/cleaning of the centres and asked what had been done to address this.

The Contracts Manager explained that since cleaning/maintenance was a constant process, SLM had altered the working times of their cleaning staff, to ensure that there was a highly visible presence at peak times. The Operations Manager was empowered to make on the spot decisions to deal with maintenance issues as they arose. He acknowledged some issues might take longer to resolve than others depending on variables such as spare parts availability.

The Area Manager commented that despite the centres being eight years old, they still looked fantastic and this was as a result of the ongoing programme of investment.

Councillor Dhindsa commented that the demographics pertaining to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) were commendable, but noted the low percentage of over 55 year olds. He asked if this was normal for leisure centres.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head said that this might be explained by the fact that Watford was a young Borough. However this was a gap in the demographic that the Council and SLM were looking to address.

Councillor Dhindsa asked if outreach work was done.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head replied that community teams did such work, but this needed to be linked in with leisure.

Councillor Dhindsa stated that at the last meeting he had asked about women only swimming sessions.

The General Manager (Central) said that such sessions had been introduced and proved popular.

Councillor Dhindsa stated that he had received complaints that the sessions were crowded and needed a greater capacity.

The Head of Corporate Strategy & Client Services explained the issue was that initially women were only in the shallow pool as they were not confident swimmers. A good deal of work had been done including introducing swimming lessons to increase their confidence and ability so they felt able to move into the large pool. There had been an 80% take up and no demands for increased pool capacity had been received since that time.

There followed a discussion around women only gym sessions and the demand for them. It was acknowledged that they needed to be commercially viable. It was also acknowledged that there were already women only gyms in Watford, which might provide a better solution than limiting the use of public buildings to particular demographics.

There was also mention of the Equalities Act and the difficulty in justifying excessively excluding men from public facilities.

Councillor Counter returned to the issue of complaints and mentioned the broken hairdryers. It was acknowledged that these had been replaced with superior quality ones, but that they see very heavy use.

Councillor Counter commented on page 17 of the agenda, where definitions were recorded as having been changed. She asked if the Council had changed them.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head informed her that she was correct and they had been amended in order for the data to remain as accurate as possible and comparable with other data.

Councillor Collett complimented SLM on their prompt handling of complaints.

Councillor Silver asked why the throughput of 14 to 25 year olds was lower than the target.

The Area Manager replied that a number of attempts had been made to engage this group of people, but had not proved very successful. There was a fundamental issue with getting young people active. He mentioned activity points again.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head commented that the College used the sports leisure facilities in a good number of their courses, so some young people were getting active.

Councillor Joynes suggested a smart card for leisure members.

Councillor Silver asked if SLM went into colleges. The General Manager (Central) stated that this was the case and that the centres worked with a variety of partners.

There followed a discussion around ways to get young people more active and involved with sport.

Councillor Williams commented that he expected the centres might be affected by competition from the new academies with their sports facilities. He also commented on the maximum 10 day turnaround for complaints. He suggested that it might have been interesting to know the average time taken with a view to a reduction in the maximum time.

Councillor Dhindsa commented that the statistics regards the staff age demographics were interesting, but he would have liked to have seen breakdown figures for the staff BME ethnicity.

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head replied that this was essentially a first attempt and the BME questions were not included, in the interests of simplicity, but would be included in the future.

The Chairman then raised the issue of staffing levels and safety from the previous meeting, where members of staff are employed to deal with such issues (for example a lifeguard), could SLM confirm they were fully trained and there were enough staff.

The Contracts Manager assured the Committee that all lifeguards were trained prior to being employed. Whilst there had been a slight dip in staffing levels in response to wider funding cuts, the Committee were assured that staff levels had been restored.

There was a brief discussion concerning a note that had been in one of the gyms that stated if there was no staff member in the gym, go to the reception.

The Contracts Manager commented that there were a panic alarms in the gyms.

The Chairman then raised the issue of the food in the café and the apparent lack of healthy options.

The Contracts Manager commented that the cafés were, to an extent bound by the pressures of customer choice. He added that the cafés also had a 5 star rating for food safety and had removed many of the sugary drinks from sale. Additionally he stated that they had attained a silver award via the “Eat Out, Eat Well” accreditation scheme. This required numerous criteria to be met and ensured the highest standards for the customers. He added that they had only recently been upgraded to a gold standard.

The Chairman suggested that achievements such as this should be publicised.

Councillor Counter asked if the dietary awards had British Dietary Association approval. The Contracts Manager was not entirely certain of this, but he stated that he believed it was the case.

The Chairman asked for an update regarding the climbing wall.

The General Manager (Central) stated that there had been a great deal of investment in marketing. The temporary climbing wall had been a successful feature at the open sports day in Watford. Furthermore the “Get a Grip” promotion had resulted in a 31% increase in adult attendance and a 24% increase in junior attendance over the past year. He acknowledged that there was more to be done in such areas as birthday parties and corporate events.

Councillor Williams asked if SLM publicised any information about sugar apps.

The Contracts Manager stated that he had looked at the app and found that a number of products were missing. He added that SLM had carried out campaigns with UK Active and that Nutrition Complete were one of their partner companies, which had allowed them to offer a full package of diet and exercise programmes.

Councillor Williams noted favourably that the work force contained over 50% women. He asked for a breakdown in the BME statistics for the future and concurred with Councillor Dhindsa on the matter.

Councillor Silver commented on the significant difference in ratio in full and part time workers between the Woodside and Central sites and asked if the reason was understood.

The Area Manager pointed out that one possible reason was the marked difference in the sizes of the two centres. The General Manager (Woodside) pointed out that the staff had to be aligned to one site for payroll purposes, but that they might be asked to work at either centre.

There then followed a discussion around this.

RESOLVED:

that the Panel note the report.

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UPDATE ON ACTIONS

The Corporate, Leisure & Community Client Section Head addressed SLM 22, stating there was a 20% turnover in staff. To give some context he added that the figure for Watford Borough Council was 7.8%. The difference reflected the youthful and more transient nature of the Leisure Centre work force.

Regarding PR54, Councillor Joynes commented on the importance of asking the end users of their requirements, before signing off the new contract.

The Head of Corporate Strategy & Client Services referred to a document that addressed action PR52 and provided a definition of community hires. There followed a discussion around this.

RESOLVED:

that the Panel note the actions.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.05 pm
and finished at 9.00 pm