

Meeting of the Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Thursday, 28 August 2025, 10.00
am

Committee Members present

Councillor Murray Turner (Chairman)
Councillor Barry Dobson (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Gareth Knight
Councillor Robert Leadenham
Councillor Chris Noon
Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Gloria Johnson
Councillor Max Sawyer
Councillor Elvis Stooke

Other Members present

Cabinet Members

Councillor Paul Stokes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Leisure

Officers

Richard Wyles, Deputy Chief Executive and S151 Officer
Karen Whitfield, Assistant Director (Leisure, Culture and Place)
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

David Rushton, Chairman LeisureSK Ltd
Matt Chamberlain, Contract Manager Leisure SK Ltd
David Scott, Director of Leisure SK Ltd

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Matt Bailey who was substituted by Councillor Gloria Johnson, Councillor Emma Baker who was substituted by Councillor Elvis Stooke, Councillor James Denniston who was substituted by Councillor Tim Harrison and Councillor Rhea Rayside who was substituted by Councillor Max Sawyer.

14. Disclosure of Interests

None disclosed.

15. Grantham Meres Leisure Centre Gym Refurbishment

The Chairman of LeisureSK Ltd, David Ruston gave a presentation to the Committee on why investing in the fitness suite at Grantham Meres Leisure Centre was necessary. Mr Ruston informed the Committee that he had been involved in various sectors of the leisure industry for a considerable amount of time and had been involved with the Meres Leisure Centre when it had first opened.

It was stated that income from the health and fitness sector was not as strong as it used to be when the Meres Leisure Centre first opened due to the increased level of competition, however, it was still a critical income generation for any leisure centre particularly those within South Kesteven.

The industry was movable and with customer expectations, it was critical that fitness suites stayed relevant and maintained a competitive edge in an increasing competitive market.

It was noted that the fitness offer had been performing well within LeisureSK Ltd and was performing above targets and budgets.

The equipment at the Meres Leisure Centre was between seven and ten years old and was in need of replacement, it was generally acknowledged that the lifespan of gym equipment was eight years. Doing nothing in respect of the equipment at the Meres was not an option as the equipment would become unreliable if not replaced. Although this was an investment proposal, what was being looked into was the replacement of equipment to keep the fitness suite offer competitive.

The proposal was for a £240,000 investment to refurbish the Meres fitness suite including replacing all equipment. It was proposed that a competitive tendering process would be undertaken to include the whole project that included equipment, fixtures, fittings, flooring, lighting etc as this was best practice within the industry to let one contract rather than split the contract which could lead to complications in the future.

It was noted that of the £240,000 investment, 90% would be for the equipment replacement. It was expected that work on the gym suite would be carried out in December 2025, before January 2026 as January, February and March were peak times for people to use a gym following New Years resolutions to join a gym.

The procurement process would be undertaken as soon as possible working with Welland Procurement and would be focused on delivering Best Value and the process would encourage the latest solutions and innovations.

Reference was made to the refurbishment that had taken place at Bourne Leisure Centre in 2022 which had resulted in a significant increase in income.

The fitness suite at the Meres was currently operating at 30% less than pre pandemic levels in terms of membership numbers. It was stated that there was potential for more people to join the gym once a competitive offer could be given. Reference was made to the customer survey that had been undertaken with current customers and the feedback given which was contained in the appendix to the report and was also presented on a slide in relation to the increase in monthly income following Bourne Leisure Centre's refurbishment. It was stated that the income had exceeded the cost of the capital.

Customer feedback had been undertaken electronically or through the App or through coaches talking to customers.

Of those that responded to the question of "how important it is for the gym to have the latest equipment" 63% responded that it was very important which supported the need to keep the gym offer relevant and up to date. Further slides shown covered if improvements were made to the gym what would you like to see and these covered increased free weights and the largest was more variety of machines with some wanting increased floor space.

It was confirmed that currently the gym was doing quite well, however if nothing was done to keep customers happy and keep the offer relevant people would go elsewhere.

In terms of the return on investment this was outlined within the exempt appendix to the report. The essence of this was that membership costs would be increased by £2 per month with membership numbers projected to increase between 5% and 15% which were still below pre pandemic levels.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member responsible for Leisure indicated that the situation had been presented within the report and the presentation given to the Committee.

Members discussed the report before them with the following questions being asked:

- What were the membership numbers and also how many pieces of equipment were being replaced. It was noted that 59 stations which contained a mixture of cardio and weight training equipment would be replaced. The other information was contained within the exempt appendix.
- It was felt that it wasn't a fair comparison to use Bourne Leisure Centre as a template for the Meres Leisure Centre as Grantham had far more competition with gym organisations within the town. It was stated that it was an example to show the membership growth on the back of investment/refurbishment.
- Realistic growth for the Meres Leisure Centre was between 5% - 15%

It was proposed, seconded and agreed to exclude the press and public at this point of the meeting as it was anticipated that, in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public may be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business because of the likelihood that otherwise exempt information, as described in paragraph 3 of the Act (as amended) would be disclosed to them.

Public session resumed at 10:24am

A Member of the Committee thanked Officers for the report and stated that new gym equipment often generated new membership in a gym and he felt that the figures of between 5% -15% was conservative. The Member indicated that this was the proactive investment needed, especially due to the age of the current equipment which kept breaking down and would be detrimental to retaining membership of the gym. Doing nothing would also risk losing existing members. The Business Plan before members he felt was sound and even with no growth in membership the refurbishment would pay for itself within the lifetime of the contract. It was of massive community benefit to Grantham to help people lead a more active healthy lifestyle. The timing for the works to be carried out were ideal and a comprehensive refurbishment and refit would give Grantham a facility to be proud of and he proposed the recommendation as contained in the report.

Another Member thanked the Officer for the presentation and the arguments put forward together with the evidence submitted which were overwhelming but felt that there were two areas for consideration. The Member did not disagree with what had been said but felt that caveats should be added. He felt that LeisureSK Ltd should not be trying to compete with the private sector, the role was to provide a leisure facility that the private sector could not provide and to minimise costs in carrying that out.

The Member then stated that he did not feel that he had an interest but that both of his sons had swimming lessons at the Meres. He was not a member of the Meres and neither was his wife, the reason that they weren't members of the Meres was due to the changing rooms. The Member agreed that refurbishing the gym was necessary but felt that the state of the changing rooms impacted the bottom line. The Member made reference to Bourne and Stamford also in relation to the changing room facilities and also the number of comments made recently about the attention that the Meres Leisure Centre was getting. He spoke about the number of children who attended on a Saturday morning and he felt that those who were "adjacent", parents, grandparents who brought their children to swimming lessons, but were not members of the Meres, should be surveyed as he felt that the issue of the changing rooms would score highly in any survey about the reason why they weren't members of the Meres. He felt that a proper review of the changing facilities in all three leisure centres needed to be undertaken and a potential maintenance budget put in place to address an issue that frustrated a lot of people. He felt that the loan for the gym equipment was necessary but it should be conditional on LeisureSK Ltd or the Council carrying out a survey with people who are member "adjacent" to find out what is most off putting for them

being members of the Meres. He wanted the Cabinet to commit to undertaking a proper review of how the changing facilities could be improved.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Leisure stated that he didn't want anything to slow down what was happening with the gym, but indicated that the Cabinet were aware of the situation in respect of the changing facilities. Money had been allocated and the Deputy Leader stated that there was a commitment in place to look at addressing the issues.

The Chairman of LeisureSK Ltd, Mr Rushton stated that a Business Plan was being compiled to look at the changing facilities particularly in Bourne and Stamford as there was evidence within the leisure industry that moving from segregated changing to a changing village improved the financial performance of the facilities. Mr Rushton agreed with what had been said in relation to the changing facilities at all three leisure centres and confirmed that it was on LeisureSK Ltd's radar.

Further discussion followed in respect of the changing facilities and the acknowledgement that money was available for the work to be undertaken, however the Member felt that due to the current political pressures within the Council in respect of the four towns within the District, he felt that much more certainty and political drive was required regarding the work. Reference was made to the Government grant received in respect of the solar panels for the Meres which had led to a lot of social media reaction. The Member felt that far more certainty around works to the changing facilities needed to be made even if it required the maintenance budget to be advanced forward.

The Deputy Chief Executive and S151 Officer reassured the Committee that the Investment Reserve that had been established as part of the out-turn for 2025/26, and approved by the Governance and Audit Committee was not time limited. He stated that the Reserve was available now and Officers were looking at the work from an objective perspective through the condition surveys route. The surveys would look at the age of the buildings and the deterioration of some of the areas within the buildings as well as customer feedback and LeisureSK Ltd's view from customer feedback. All that information would be brought through the committee cycle within the next few months to rationalise how the £500k would be used.

The Deputy Chief Executive and S151 Officer indicated that he was doubtful that the money would be enough for all four sites (3 leisure centres and Grantham Stadium). Areas being looked at were the changing areas, toilets as well as communal areas, meeting spaces, any interactive point within the buildings where the customer enters a building from the reception point onwards. He stated that care would need to be taken on how the funding was allocated out across the sites which would be led by evidence following the surveys.

The Deputy Chief Executive and S151 Officer stated that the changing facilities in all the leisure centres appeared "tired" and it was what work was required, whether this was cosmetic and more a cleanliness issue or whether something

more fundamental was required such as repurposing or re-modernisation as highlighted by the Chairman of LeisureSK Ltd. He reiterated that he felt the £500k would not be sufficient, but it was enough to make a start and move forward with what the evidence showed and the customer feedback received.

It was stated that there was nothing to stop Cabinet as part of the next budget cycle to recommend to Council further investment in this part of the leisure asset base. It was noted that there was also a significant maintenance programme in place which would touch all the leisure centres as well as the Council's other assets. There were millions of pounds going into the leisure centres, not all of which could be seen from the public's perspective but money was being invested to make sure the assets remained open and stayed legally compliant.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Leisure stated that Cabinet were aware of the issues and were under "no illusions" that the changing facilities in the leisure centres needed addressing.

The comments made regarding the changing rooms were acknowledged but it was stated that they were not the reason that the meeting had been convened it was for the gym refurbishment and the Member referred to the proposal that he had already made and whether there was a seconder.

The Chairman indicated that he was giving Members the opportunity to make comment before a vote was taken.

Another Member echoed comments made by previous Members and made reference to comments made at a previous meeting of the Committee. He was in favour of the refurbishment of the gym but felt that the changing facilities also needed to be addressed. He then made reference to an email that he had forwarded to the Chairman of the Committee which he had received from the Chairman of Grantham Swimming Club complaining about the state of the facilities such as cold showers, children changing in communal areas. The Member felt that if one of the biggest customers of the Meres was complaining about the facilities and had been complaining for some time about the "woeful inadequate facilities" the overall package offered needed to be addressed. He stated that he would circulate the email to Members of the Committee. The Chairman indicated that he had replied to the email and passed it on to the Deputy Leader and the Assistant Director (Leisure, Culture and Place).

The Chairman stated that it seemed to be the will of the Committee that work was undertaken in respect of the changing room facilities. He referred to the Investment Reserve fund that had been implemented by the Committee to look not just at buildings but the aesthetics of them and how they may be improved in the future.

The Chairman stated that he appreciated that the changing facilities were not on the agenda but he did want to make reference to them following the email that he had received.

The proposal put forward received a seconder and on being put to the vote was **AGREED.**

Recommendation

That the Committee reviewed the business plan and endorse the commencement of a procurement exercise to provide the refurbishment of Grantham Meres Leisure Centre gym.

16. Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 10:45am.