

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Monday, 4 November 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair), Stephen Booth, Leanne Brady, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Mason Humberstone and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Julie Ashley-Wren, Kamal Choudhury and Akin Elekolusi.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 9 SEPTEMBER 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 9 September 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PERFORMANCE OF THE NEW LEISURE CONTRACT

The Chair welcomed the guest speakers to the meeting. Cllr Lorraine Rossati (Portfolio Holder - Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing), Ryan Ansell (Health and Sport Strategy Manager), Geoff Caine (Culture, Wellbeing and Leisure Services Manager), Alan Prescott (Everyone Active – Contract Manager) and Chris Williams (Everyone Active – Area Contract Manager).

The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) introduced the discussion, expressing their appreciation for the progress achieved in the first year of Everyone Active's contract. The Committee heard that the contractor had exceeded initial expectations, particularly in terms of performance, adaptability, and collaborative spirit, which aligned with the Council's vision for a dynamic and transformative leisure partner.

The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) highlighted Everyone Active's expanded influence as a national entity managing various facilities in the region, including theatres such as Gordon Craig. This broader network enhanced their sustainability and booking capacity, bringing high-profile acts to the area. They

praised the inclusive atmosphere of the Everyone Active gym, where people of all backgrounds and abilities felt welcomed.

The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) spoke of the increasing popularity of pickleball, a sport growing in the UK and accessible to all ages, and acknowledged the considerable investments made by Everyone Active and the Council in upgrading local leisure facilities. They concluded by reinforcing the Council's commitment to supporting leisure and wellbeing, emphasising the importance of promoting both physical and mental health in the community.

The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager presented a comprehensive overview of the transformation in leisure services since the transition to the Everyone Active contract. They began by outlining the structure and scope of their department within the Council, highlighting that Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure operated alongside various essential services. The Committee heard of the origins of the prior leisure contract, which was established to address Council spending thresholds but offered limited contractual rigor and flexibility.

The Committee were advised that the renewal process for the contract involved extensive public consultations, a sports summit, and an in-depth appraisal to define the desired standards and expectations. The Council also instituted a Programme Board to oversee this process, which evaluated bids based on a balanced scorecard of finance, quality, and social value. This new focus on social value allowed the Council to assess the economic and community benefits provided by bidders, an aspect that was independently verified.

The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager confirmed that after a thorough two-stage procurement process, Everyone Active emerged as the top bidder, while the previous contractor, SLL, was unsuccessful, ultimately going into liquidation after losing multiple contracts. The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager highlighted that Everyone Active's contract had significantly reduced Council expenditure, with savings driven by reductions in management fees and utilities costs. Furthermore, they praised the seamless transfer of services, including the addition of the Ridling's Athletic Stadium and the "Active Communities" initiative, which aimed to engage residents outside of traditional leisure centres.

The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) added that Everyone Active's branding and marketing efforts had noticeably revitalised the facilities, attracting new members and creating an energetic and inclusive environment. The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager concurred, noting a £1 million investment in facility upgrades, particularly in media displays, signage, and building repairs. They commended Everyone Active's proactive approach to managing staff and facilities, as well as their expertise in building and maintaining leisure infrastructure.

In closing, the Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager described the working relationship with Everyone Active as "a breath of fresh air," with shared goals, collaborative problem-solving, and active community sponsorship. However, The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) reassured the committee that the Council maintained oversight and accountability measures, with issues being addressed promptly by Everyone Active.

At this juncture, the Chair invited Members to ask questions.

Members asked questions related to the booking system.

The Area Contract Manager, Everyone Active, clarified that bookings could be made up to five days in advance for non-members and up to 14 days for members, via phone, app, or online, with real-time availability visible on the app. The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager added that high demand, especially for popular sessions like Aquasize, often exceeded capacity, and that a planned new leisure facility would increase capacity. He also advised the Committee that the booking system, despite occasional limitations, was an improvement over the former first-come-first-served approach.

The Chair invited Everyone Active to present to the Committee.

The Contract Manager (Everyone Active), provided a comprehensive presentation that highlighted the accomplishments and challenges encountered during the initial phase of their contract with Stevenage.

The Committee heard that the contract with Everyone Active began on 1st April 2023 and required extensive mobilisation. This period involved significant staff adjustments, including new uniforms, revised HR processes, and re-certifications.

The transition included the implementation of new booking and purchasing systems, which, despite providing benefits, initially presented challenges for both staff and members. However, Everyone Active received robust support from staff across other sites, smoothing this complex transition.

Addressing staff development and recognition the Contract Manager (Everyone Active) underscored the value placed on Stevenage's local staff noting that talents had been recognised and deployed across broader roles within the company. The Committee heard of Everyone Active's commitment to recognising and nurturing talent had translated into broader opportunities and enhanced roles for Stevenage employees. Examples included, the theatre manager initially managing only the Gordon Craig Theatre, who now oversaw additional sites, while the former Stevenage site golf manager, was now working at multiple centres in a regional management capacity.

The Contract Manager (Everyone Active) advised the Committee of investment into various facilities has been substantial. This included:

- Trackman Technology at the golf centre, enhancing visitor experience and boosting activity.
- Upgraded Fitness Studios and Gym Equipment: £45,000 invested in new kit for studios, alongside a £400,000 upgrade of gym facilities, restoring membership numbers to pre-Covid levels.
- Community Focus Initiatives: Programmes like the Health Action Day had engaged local groups and partners, promoting wellness through activities that reached beyond traditional fitness.

- Growth in Pickleball Popularity: This new sport had surged in interest, creating a high demand for courts.

The Contract Manager (Everyone Active) informed the Committee of renovations in the café bar area of the Gordon Craig that had led to a revenue boost, and that the theatre team had expanded production capabilities, such as building sets, thereby creating a new revenue stream. The theatre's increased ticket sales also indicated a rise in community engagement.

Discussing challenges faced with ageing infrastructure, the Contract Manager (Everyone Active) informed the Committee that despite partial refurbishments, the age of buildings like the swimming centre and the theatre posed challenges. Essential maintenance of outdated equipment continued, with Everyone Active relying on the Council's support for boiler and lighting replacements. They emphasised that additional future investment was needed to maintain those ageing assets although the swimming centre had been refreshed with updates to the health suite and energy-efficient improvements, like pool covers and boiler upgrades. Swim school enrolment had increased, with over 1,500 children participating alongside regular school-based programs.

The Committee heard that the Active Community Programme had exceeded expectations by successfully integrating health and wellness initiatives aimed at underserved populations. Collaborations with the Integrated Care Board and local GPs had further strengthened referrals and engagement with residents needing specialised fitness programmes.

The Committee were informed that Everyone Active now managed the Fairland's Valley Splash Park and Ridlings Athletics Stadium and had actively promoted community programs such as the NHS Rainbow Run. A dedicated community team focused on enhancing health and sports initiatives for residents, while partnerships with the council and other agencies had enabled the creation of targeted programs in areas like atrial fibrillation and blood pressure monitoring.

The Committee were advised that Everyone Active sponsored Stevenage's men's and women's football teams and valued community feedback through a robust system for complaints and compliments, with an average 17-hour response time. The organisation's priorities were fitness memberships, swim lessons, golf participation, and casual sports usage, with a core commitment to commercial growth, colleague development, community wellness, and environmental goals (carbon net zero).

The Contract Manager (Everyone Active) concluded their presentation by providing information regarding targeted health initiatives that focused on reducing obesity, mental health support, dementia, and healthy lifestyle promotion, Everyone Active had recently secured funding for a 300-space weight management programme, which integrated physical activity and GP referrals. Future ambitions included encouraging healthier children's programmes and fostering local partnerships through various community spaces and resources.

The Chair invited Members to ask questions.

Responding to questions related to improving communication with the public, Everyone Active acknowledged that their app was fitness-centric, not ideally tailored for local event listings. Everyone Active advised the Committee that they used a Facebook page for events in Stevenage. Members suggested that Everyone Active could increase visibility and accessibility of events by including a broader social media use beyond Facebook, targeting younger audiences through Tik-Tok and Instagram.

In response to a question regarding the provision of more detailed year-on-year participation data to monitor improvements and assess service impact, Everyone Active cited challenges in direct comparison due to different reporting methods from the previous operator but assured Members that they would provide year-end data to establish a baseline for future reporting.

Members also made comments related to:

- Gym Anxiety - particularly in weightlifting areas that can be dominated by male participants. A Member proposed women-only or introductory classes to make the gym more accessible to women interested in strength training. Everyone Active already offered small introductory sessions in different gym areas, but these were not exclusively women-only. There was agreement that a female-focused class could be beneficial, and the Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) suggested following up on this idea with Everyone Active.
- The Affordability of Swimming Lessons - concerns about the high cost of swim lessons, particularly for families with multiple children. Currently, Everyone Active did not have a discount system for families with multiple children enrolled. They did, however, offer alternatives such as crash courses and top-up swimming lessons through schools. Everyone Active noted that capacity issues in the swimming programme also limited the feasibility of such discounts.
- Health and Socio-Economic Barriers - linking the town's socio-economic factors to poor health outcomes, highlighting the importance of accessible exercise options, such as outdoor gyms. Whether the council could use existing benefit data to target support toward families who might struggle to afford facilities. The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) discussed collaborative efforts with public health services and noted that Stevenage was securing funding for a new multi-use games facility in King George V Park, aimed to improve accessibility, especially in underserved areas. Everyone Active advised that they did conduct some low-cost community sessions, although they were limited in scale.
- Community and Seasonal Initiatives – The Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager mentioned the community allotment and mobile Healthy Hub as innovative health and social initiatives. They emphasised the dynamic development of community-focused projects and mentioned that outdoor activities would continue to evolve, depending on seasonal suitability.

- Venue Access for Local Theatre Groups – Members highlighted that while Stevenage benefited from a vibrant amateur theatre scene, groups like the Lytton Players faced prohibitive costs for using the Gordon Craig Theatre, which seated 500. Historically, there was a discounted rate for community groups, but this option was no longer available, making it difficult for groups to afford the space, especially when they typically played to smaller audiences. Everyone Active acknowledged the concern, indicating they could investigate options with the theatre’s programme manager, as the schedule was often full. Meanwhile, the Culture, Wellbeing, and Leisure Services Manager clarified that there were some free community lets under the theatre’s contract, used by events like the Stevenage Festival, which included the Lytton Players. They also noted that the Gordon Craig Theatre’s large capacity made it challenging for groups like the Lytton Players to sell enough tickets to make their productions financially viable in such a large venue. As an alternative, the group had been offered Event Island for outdoor productions and had been given access to equipment, such as a donated lighting desk.

The Chair voiced concerns about a lack of public knowledge about diabetes and pre-diabetes and appealed for Everyone Active to launch an initiative focussed on diabetes education and prevention to address the significant prevalence of diabetes in Stevenage. The Portfolio Holder (Culture, Leisure and Wellbeing) pointed out the importance of tailored communication for high-risk groups, including ethnic minorities and women. She suggested integrating these efforts with the ICB, local GPs, and community health initiatives to address Stevenage’s lower health outcomes.

At this juncture, the Chair highlighted the council’s achievements in health and well-being, congratulating the team for winning the “Best Health and Wellbeing Initiative” award. Special recognition was given to the Health & Sport Strategy Manager, who had grown from a Community Development Officer into a key figure in the Council’s health and well-being initiatives. The Chair praised Health & Sport Strategy Manager for his consistent commitment, presence, and positive impact on the community, noting that his efforts had been instrumental to the programme’s success.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was none.

At this juncture the Chair addressed a longstanding issue of damp and mould in Council properties, emphasising the council’s commitment to the issue and outlining plans for intensified action.

The Chair highlighted that the Committee has prioritised addressing damp and mould concerns for over a decade, preceding recent national interest. The committee has historically pressured the council to improve services and successfully secured a significant investment for the department handling these

issues. She expressed satisfaction with prior progress reports on the matter.

The Chair informed Members that a recent case brought to their attention suggested potential ongoing issues, raising concerns that contradicted the reported improvements. This had prompted the Chair to initiate an item for discussion at an upcoming committee meeting. The Chair encouraged members to investigate further cases of damp and mould within their wards to gather information that could support an impactful discussion at the next meeting.

The Chair emphasised the importance of members acting as advocates for residents, particularly when it came to uncovering any issues that may have been overlooked or concealed and stressed that the Committee's role was to represent the community and act as a crucial channel for residents' concerns.

The Chair expressed frustration about changes in personnel within the Council, noting that this could hinder continuity in addressing long-term issues. The Chair concluded by highlighting the importance of consistency and accountability in the council's response to damp and mould cases.

5 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

6 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was none.

CHAIR