

COUNCILLOR PHIL GILCHRIST

## MINORITY REPORT

Call In Co-ordinating Committee 23 September 2014

### Transformation of Leisure Services Sports and Leisure Facilities Pricing Structure

The Co-ordinating Committee sought information on the impact of the proposals outlined in the Cabinet report of 7<sup>th</sup> July 2014. (Cabinet Minute 37 refers)

The Cabinet report set out these considerations -

#### 3.3.1

At present, all current serving and former armed service personnel receive free use of facilities at all Leisure Centres, at all times. Currently 2,400 individuals have registered for this generous concession.

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#### 3.3.2

The proposal is to target the free use benefit to current serving members of the armed forces (including the Territorial Army and reservists) who are from Wirral and for former service personnel who have suffered a disabling injury when in the services and/or in receipt of a disability benefit.

In addition, a new programme of support will be available for currently serving members of the armed services and injured / disabled former service personnel which will include one to one gym instruction and a regular newsletter which will be developed with other agencies and departments to help to ensure they receive every support possible to reflect the Council's complete commitment to support people who rightly serve our utmost respect and support.

#### 3.3.3

Those who currently have the benefit of free use but who would not qualify under the new policy will be given access to a discount of up to 25% on the corporate Invigor8 membership.

#### 3.3.4

This package of support will remain one of the most extensive concessions in the region for armed forces personnel and will commence from September 2014.

Questioning at the committee established that there had been a substantial increase in the numbers qualifying for the concession. It would have been desirable for a breakdown of these figures to have been provided, in writing, in advance to enable better informed discussion.

In further questioning officers compared Wirral's arrangements with a selection of nearby local Authorities with less extensive scheme.

However, it was pointed out that in January 2014 Rochdale had considered its 'pilot' scheme and had decided to extend it for a further twelve months. That Borough had decided to provide free facilities for all Regular and Reservist serving personnel and unemployed Veterans (with proof required) from the Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy.

The Co-ordinating Committee heard of the work being done to ensure that Wirral's veterans needs were being considered and addressed.

Notwithstanding this it became apparent that one of the witnesses called by Wirral's officers had concerns about the proposed new policy.

The Co-ordinating committee also heard anecdotal evidence which suggested some unintended consequences of the existing arrangements but there was only limited information given on the uptake of the present concessions.

The report on the Review of Leisure Centres and Golf Courses considered by the Cabinet in September 2013 had highlighted the 'operating subsidies' of the various facilities offered, with the subsidy to the Leisure Centres and the Marine Lake reported as £4.5 million. It had also pointed out that if central recharges, capital and repair programmes were fully taken into account, the then overall cost subsidy was around £9.5 million.

The Co-ordinating Committee heard that a programme of investment and managerial changes was in progress, aimed at reducing the subsidy and was designed to increase income.

Based on the available information it appeared that the effect of the changes would reduce the numbers of residents qualifying for the 'concession' as well as removing 'non Wirral residents'.

It was also seen as a way of replacing income foregone by the concession, thereby reducing the subsidy to the sports and leisure operation. There were suggestions that there were former members of the forces who were able to secure good employment after their service to the country.

However, in the overall context of the costs of the service the contribution that bringing charges in, albeit reduced, was not presented in detail at the meeting.

It would be right for each local authority to support its serving and former members of the forces and, on that basis, Wirral would support those from within its boundaries, in the expectation that other authorities should provide support as they saw reasonable.

Based on the firm identification of those likely to take part, therefore, Cabinet be requested to reconsider the proposed policy.