9th December 2020

Dear Didcot Resident,

Since SOLL (Vale) (trading as Park Club) announced on 25th November they will no longer operate Willowbrook Leisure Centre due to financial problems. Due to the concerns from Didcot residents, I have decided to hold an Extraordinary Full Council Meeting. It is important that the Council listens to the views of residents on this matter, as well as seeking legal advice, so that all available options can be assessed.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to write to me and other representatives of the Council, as well as those who spoke passionately at the Council meeting held on 8th December. Councillors of all political parties are residents too, and we all share the frustration and disappointment of losing such an important leisure facility in Didcot. We understand the importance of exercise for fitness and mental health as well as having this facility available for other kinds of activities, including clubs, sports, and parties.

In an ideal world where money was not an issue, as Leader of the Council I would love to reopen Willowbrook in its current form. However, I must look at budgets—including our current financial obligations and commitments, and the forecast for our income (which has been severely impacted by COVID-19)—so that we can continue to protect the public purse, especially in these unprecedented times.

Didcot Town Council owns several buildings within Didcot, some we run ourselves and others we have tenants. Willowbrook is owned by Didcot Town Council and was run on our behalf by SOLL (Vale) on a commercial business providing a gym, exercise classes and other activities to its members.

Many residents have suggested the Council step in and help SOLL (Vale) or give it to a community organisation to run. Although this sounds easy and great there are significant barriers to prevent this. For one, giving financial help is not a viable option as the position SOLL (Vale) are in, is forcing the closure of other leisure centres they manage. The Council is unable to bail out one business as that would be unfair to all other businesses. We cannot favour one business. It needs to be stated that all the equipment in Willowbrook did not belong to Didcot Town Council and will be removed as part of SOLL (Vale) vacating the building. Any alternative provider will be faced with a significant investment to reinstate the equipment and facilities to return Willowbrook to be a significant asset for Didcot.

In this current climate, where job security is uncertain, many on furlough and businesses closed or on the brink, any additional costs for Didcot Town Council will fall on the residents of Didcot which will mean higher council tax. The Council does not get any funding from central government and is solely reliant on revenue from Didcot residents. This makes it crucial for the Council to act appropriately with regards to Willowbrook.

Following significant legal advice, the Council has therefore decided to support SOLL (Vale’s) application for a Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA) which will allow them to continue to operate as a business using their Milton Park site only. This arrangement will allow the Council to recoup some of the money lost because of the financial agreement that is part of the CVA. As of 14th December, the Willowbrook building will be controlled by Didcot Town Council and I, with fellow Councillors, will decide the next steps, including who takes over. It will take time to seek other operators, service providers and review proposals received from interested parties as well ensure the necessary legal and practical measures are taken to reopen Willowbrook as soon as possible.

In the meantime, the Council will look to refurbish the building to increase its attractiveness to potential operators and be ready for the next phase in the life of this much-loved facility. Most importantly, we will run a Didcot-wide consultation to see what residents want. This will be your opportunity to tell me and the Council what you would like Willowbrook to offer our community. Please look out for the details of the consultation on our website and social media channels in the coming weeks.

On a positive note, I want to highlight the projects that the Council are working on that will enhance community life. Below is a list of the exciting projects we have lined up for next year and beyond:

* Finalising the designs for a brand-new community and sports pavilion in Edmonds Park
* Installing a splash park for kids, big and small, to enjoy at Edmonds Park.
* New football pitches and sand pit on Ladygrove Park.
* Maintenance and replacement of playgrounds and play equipment.
* A new permanent path across Stubbing’s Land that will be safer and accessible by all—and, importantly, much better than the current muddy track.
* The return of the Town Fayre – subject to Government guidelines.
* Improvements to Ladygrove Lakes so we can maintain its fish stock and support other local wildlife. We have recruited a new Outdoor Services Manager who has some exciting environmental plans to make the lakes a destination for all.

I hope that this explains what Didcot Town Council plans to do next with Willowbrook, as well as highlighting how hard we are working on improvements to the leisure provisions in the town.

If you have any questions, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

I would like to wish you on behalf of Didcot Town Council a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

And—please remember, hands, face, space. Stay safe!

Regards,

Cllr Mocky Khan

Leader of Didcot Town Council