

HIGH PEAK BOROUGH COUNCIL

Council

21 February 2024

TITLE:	Questions of which notice has been given
CONTACT OFFICER:	Linden Vernon – Head of Democratic Services
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

1. Question received from Maurice McCabe for the Executive Councillor for Regeneration, Tourism and Leisure:

I, on behalf of a group of New Mills residents opposed to changes to the leisure centre, would like to submit the following question to the Executive Councillor for Regeneration, Tourism and Leisure, for the full council meeting on Wednesday 21st February.

We are very concerned about the proposed changes to New Mills Leisure Centre. As far as we understand, High Peak Borough Council intends to remove the squash court and a third of the sports hall, and replace them with a wellness centre, gym and fitness studio.

The squash court is currently a flourishing part of the local community, enjoyed by around 200 users of all ages over a three-month period, including at least 30 juniors. Significant public interest has been shown in retaining the squash court as evidenced by an 800+ strong petition and a protest attended by 50+ people.

The sports hall is used throughout the week by hundreds of people of all ages for a variety of sports including: roller-skating; pickleball; badminton; cheerleading; basketball; walking tennis; walking netball; table tennis; football; as well group exercise classes. Many of these sports are relatively new and rapidly growing in popularity, and cater for groups the Council wishes to see exercise more. In particular, local primary and secondary schools use it for a range of PE and sporting activities. Space for these activities will be greatly reduced; many activities will be impossible in the reduced area.

From what we understand, these plans have been in the pipeline for some time. We have been told that without them the leisure centre will not be financially viable in 10 years' time, and that this is the only option for keeping it open. There has been no public consultation, and these proposals will have a major negative effect on the

community, especially on children's sport. We have only been able to gather this much information through the efforts of our local councillors.

Our questions are:

- Due consultation is a requirement of both HPBC's and DCC's constitutions when it comes to decision making, as is openness. This gives the public a legitimate expectation that consultation will be undertaken on significant proposals before decisions are made, indeed, given the implications of the proposal, Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 may apply making an implicit statutory requirement for consultation. When will meaningful public consultation be undertaken on these proposals?
- How does removing a squash court and reducing the variety of sporting activities on offer fit in with the council's Move More strategy? In particular, how does giving fewer children access to fewer facilities fit in with the Move More strategy?
- Will you commit to working with us in an open and constructive way to ensure that the proposals meet the needs of the community, and result in a long term beneficial outcome for the people of New Mills and surrounding areas?

Response from the Executive Councillor:

"High Peak Borough Council has proudly prioritised investment in leisure facilities across the borough. Work to develop viable plans to invest have been under development for some time, including for New Mills Leisure Centre. Any investment that the Council makes in the future has to be affordable, deliverable and particularly in the case of New Mills Leisure Centre, work within a range of site restrictions which limit the number of options available to address the areas where greatest demand for expansion of our facilities exists. Proposals that work within these parameters were developed towards the end of last year and reviewed by a Working Group of cross-party councillors. Since then, stakeholder engagement has started regarding these proposals and is still ongoing as we work to test out the design from different user groups perspectives. We have reviewed your question relating to our statutory obligation to consult, and at this stage believe we are following a fair process of engagement with those groups affected.

We are aware that proposals to repurpose the squash court at New Mills Leisure Centre would impact on a group of existing users, including a small number of approx. 20-30 junior players, however, as the court is only used for approximately 33 out of an available 80 hours per week, considering whether this space could be better utilised to engage a larger number of people is justified, particularly considering the restrictions of being unable to extend the building in a sufficient way to expand facilities.

Engagement regarding proposals to repurpose the equivalent space of one badminton court is also ongoing as we are very keen to understand what the impact of this would have. We are specifically keen to understand what activities would stop should this change be implemented, in addition to understanding what new opportunities might be created as a result of the changes.

As previously mentioned, engagement regarding the proposals with user groups that would be affected by the proposals is ongoing and needs to be completed before the implications are understood. Once this has been completed we will be in a better place to consider whether general consultation or further work to refine proposals is required.”