

REGENERATION, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 OCTOBER 2016

PETITIONS

Report from: Richard Hicks, Director, Regeneration, Culture, Environment
and Transformation

Author: Steve Platt, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

To advise the Committee of any petitions received by the Council which fall within the remit of this Committee including a summary of the response sent to the lead petitioners by officers.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1 In summary, the Council's Petition Scheme requires the relevant Director to respond to the lead petitioner usually within 10 working days of the receipt of the petition by the Council. Overview and Scrutiny Committees are always advised of any petitions falling within their terms of reference together with the officer response. There is a right of referral of a petition for consideration by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the petitioners if they consider the Director's response to be inadequate. Should the Committee determine that the petition has not been dealt with adequately it may use any of its powers to deal with the matter. These powers include instigating an investigation, making recommendations to Cabinet and arranging for the matter to be considered at a meeting of the Council.
- 1.2 The petition scheme is set out in full in the Council's Constitution at:
<http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/4.01%20-Council%20rules.pdf>
- 1.3 Any budget or policy framework implications will be set out in the specific petition response.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council's Constitution provides that petitions received by the Council relating to matters within the remit of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be referred immediately to the relevant Director for consideration at officer level.

- 2.2 Where the Director is able to fully meet the request of the petitioners a response is sent setting out the proposed action and timescales for implementation.
- 2.3 For petitions where the petitioner organiser is not satisfied with the response provided by the Director there is provision for the petition organiser to request that the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the steps the Council has taken, or is proposing to take, in response to the petition.

3 Completed petitions

- 3.1 A summary of responses to petitions relevant to this Committee that have been accepted by the petition organisers is set out below.

Subject of petition	Response
<p>Petition for the reintroduction of cancelled bus services to Upper Halling.</p> <p>267 signatures.</p>	<p>The 151 bus serves Upper Halling every two hours and has done so since the contract was tendered by Kent County Council in 2010. Buses from Kings Hill to Chatham serve Upper Halling at 0728, 0952, 1152, 1352, 1535, 1606 and 1801. Buses from Chatham to Kings Hill serve Upper Halling at 0742, 0919, 1019, 1219, 1425 and 1741.</p> <p>Whilst it is acknowledged that a two-hourly service does impose some constraints, this level of service is common in rural areas where bus patronage is generally low. Medway Council also supports the Villager Service which provides a shopping trip from Upper Halling to Tesco on Friday mornings, and the Medway Mobility Service, which serves Upper Halling on Wednesdays. Medway Council is committed to ensuring that residents have reasonable access to some form of public transport. Our funding for supporting socially necessary bus services is very limited and has to be allocated carefully. Overall, the Council considers that residents of Upper Halling have acceptable, albeit basic, access to services and amenities by public transport and therefore, at the present time, this is not an option we wish to consider.</p>
<p>Petition for the Council to supply a Christmas Tree and lights for Twydell Green.</p> <p>146 signatures.</p>	<p>Last year, despite tight budgets constraints, the Council provided Christmas lights in Twydall Shopping Centre at the request of Ward Councillors. Consideration will be given to the request for lights for this year. The Council values Twydall very highly and this is demonstrated in the recent investment made in</p>

Subject of petition	Response
	providing the new Neighbourhood Community Hub which will be an excellent facility for the whole community in Twdall and the surrounding areas.
Petition in relation to proposed parking zone at Ruxton Square. 28 signatures.	The concerns raised have been passed to the integrated transport team for consideration as part of the consultation process for this scheme.
Petition against flytipping in the public alleyway between Herbert Road and Hartington Street 4 signatures.	The concerns raised have been shared with officers in Waste Services and Safer Communities teams. This public right of way is scheduled to be cleansed every four weeks by the Council's cleansing contractor, Veolia. Waste Services have been requested to arrange a response cleanse as soon as possible. In addition, the Community Warden for the area will make regular visits to the area and engage with residents concerning refuse and bulky items.
E-petition against the sale of BAE Sports and Social Club for housing development and for the Council to support local start up business to redevelop the site into a community hub. 102 signatures.	The concerns raised have been shared with officers in the Planning and Regeneration teams. Developers are expected to undertake some public consultation on their ideas for the site prior to submitting a planning application. When a planning application is received the Council will undertake its own consultation and will consider all comments received. The Council offers a number of services to local start up businesses including grants, loans and wider business training and workshop sessions through its Regeneration Delivery Service.

4. Petitions referred to this Committee

4.1 The following petitions have been referred to this Committee because the lead petitioners have indicated that they were dissatisfied with the response received from the Director.

4.2 Petition regarding reduced opening hours for the Strand Swimming Pool.

4.3 Two petitions were presented at the meeting of Council on 21 July 2016. A paper petition containing 540 signatures states:

'We the undersigned oppose Medway Council's decision – without any consultation – to slash the opening hours at the Strand Swimming Pool, Gillingham. This year the pool will not be open weekdays except for during the school holidays, and on the days that it is open, the opening hours have been cut to just 11am – 5pm. We call on Medway Council to reinstate the full 2015 opening hours so that it is open daily throughout the Summer from 8.30am – 7pm.'

- 4.4 An e-petition containing 5,048 signatures was also presented at Council on 21 July 2016. This was created via the change.org platform which, contrary to the Council's petitions scheme, does not allow signers' email address or full postal address to be submitted to the Council. The e-petition only shows each signer's name, home town, postcode and the date they signed the petition. The e-petition statement is as follows:

'Medway Council drastically slashed the opening hours for the Strand Lido this summer with zero public consultation. The popular lido will no longer be open during weekdays during term time. Lido users and local residents were not consulted about this and information about the change to the lido's opening hours were buried deep in the council's website. Lidos are booming and are becoming increasingly popular across the country. Medway Council quote cost cutting measures are needed and have not looked at other ways to keep the lido open in the week. Medway Council do not publicise the lido and it's not actively promoted.'

- 4.5 The Director of Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation responded to the lead petitioner on 4 August 2016 as follows:

'Before responding to your petition may I thank you and the Friends of Strand Pool for taking such an active interest and involvement in the pool. I know you have been working closely with my team to improve facilities and ensure the ongoing promotion of the pool and your commitment is greatly appreciated.'

We have no intention of closing the facility. Given public statements to that effect, and the tens of thousands of pounds spent on refurbishing the changing rooms, toilets and entrance in the past two years, I hope this will reassure residents, many of whom have been wrongly led to believe there is a plan to close the pool.

As with all Council facilities, The Strand is required to operate within its budget, set annually by Members. The budget for The Strand includes the park and all the dryside activities as well as the swimming pool.

Working within that budget, I expect my Head of Service and his team to develop a programme which reflects customer usage and maximises the budget to greatest effect.

When reviewing the programme it became clear from usage analysis that there were significant discrepancies in customer attendance at the swimming pool. This was in spite of attempts to generate additional activity through longer daily opening hours and extensive marketing over the previous two years.

The analysis showed that swimming pool usage was heavily weather dependant. Hot and sunny weather (circa 24C and above) attracted large numbers of customers, cooler temperatures and/or inclement weather resulted in very low pool usage.

Given the size of the pool and the consequential lifeguard requirements, allied to low customer usage on a number of days, it was therefore appropriate to review opening times.

The pool is open daily throughout the summer holidays and has been open over weekends since the end of May. It has also opened during hot, sunny weather, such as we briefly enjoyed last month.

Where we have adjusted opening days is weekdays in June and July when the children are still at school, and when the ambient temperature is still relatively low.

For comparison purposes this equated to 26 days in 2015. Of those 26 days, 20 had an average usage of below 2.5 customers per hour and four others had an average usage of below 3.5 customers per hour. This shows that considerable budget was being spent on providing a service very few customers attended, which was an unsustainable position.

You mention in the petition statement you feel the Council has not looked at other ways to keep the lido open during the week. I know this is something the Friends group has raised in discussions with my Head of Service, Bob Dimond. As has been said to the Friends, we are happy to work with you to trial sessions outside our core opening hours to see if there is a regular latent demand which is currently not being met, and I would urge you to take up this opportunity.

In terms of publicising and promoting the swimming pool, I recognise there is always more that can be done and I would like to again thank the Friends group for spreading the word about the Strand.

There has of course been considerable publicity and promotion undertaken in the past couple of years, including a promotional film, posters, leaflets, e-mail newsletters, media coverage and social media, alongside improved signage. The vast number of people who visit the Strand park and the swathes of bathers in the swimming pool on hot, sunny days suggest there is extensive knowledge of the facility. However, as I say, there is always more that can be done.

I hope this answers the points you raised in your petition statement and I hope the Friends of Strand Pool will continue their excellent work in conjunction with my service to support The Strand.'

- 4.6 On 14 August 2016, the lead petitioner requested that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The letter is attached at Appendix 1.

4.7 The Director has further commented as follows:

The service has continued to analyse pool usage throughout this summer.

Analysing information from the opening in May to the start of the summer holidays shows the pool was open for 13 days when the ambient temperature was 24C and above. The average number of customers per day on these days was 164.

There were 16 days when the ambient temperature was below 24C. The average number of customers per day on these days was 19.

Since the winter closure of the pool at the beginning of September, a condition survey has been undertaken for the whole of The Strand including the swimming pool. This has highlighted a number of issues now with the council's asset and property services team for consideration.

Informal discussions have been held with Sport England and the Heritage Lottery Fund concerning the possibility of capital funding bids.

The service continues to work with the Friends group to improve customer awareness of the pool and to identify ways of increasing usage.

4.8 A petition for a speed camera on Walderslade Road

4.9 This petition containing 18 signatures was received by the Council on 20 June 2016. The petition states:

'The area of great concern is between the points of the Poachers Pocket Pub/Restaurant and the junction of Weeds Wood Road. The traffic in this area outside of the early mornings and school traffic times is travelling at unacceptable speeds and is in the collective view of the immediate residents, dangerous.'

4.10 The Director of Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation responded to the lead petitioner on 30 June 2016 as follows:

'I of course understand the desire for a deterrent to speeding road users, particularly within a primarily residential area. It is difficult to understand the attitude of those road users that put themselves and others at risk by driving dangerously or in excess of the speed limit. I therefore also understand the request for a speed camera.

As you may be aware, the section of Walderslade Road in question is already part of a designated mobile speed camera enforcement location. This means that periodically a mobile speed camera vehicle visits Walderslade Road to carry out speed enforcement checks.

This mobile camera site was introduced over 10 years ago and since this time the frequency of killed or seriously injured casualties has reduced. Police records indicate that no serious or fatal collisions have been recorded at this location in the last 7 years.

The operation of a mobile camera site at Walderslade Road has led to a reduction in the severity and frequency of injury collisions. Whilst speeding, inconsiderate and dangerous drivers are of course a matter of serious concern, the basis upon which we introduce road safety improvements is casualty reduction, whereby locations with an ongoing poor road casualty history are tackled first, to help prevent further casualties on our roads.

Regrettably, at the current time there are other locations within Medway recording poorer safety records, which are therefore a higher priority for safety engineering intervention. Following due consideration, it is unfortunately not possible for physical speed restriction measures to be introduced at this time. This will continue to be monitored.

The current mobile speed camera site will remain in place. I will also ensure that the existing speed camera signing at Walderslade Road is reviewed for completeness. This is in place to advise road users of the use of speed cameras on this road.'

- 4.11 On 5 July 2016, the lead petitioner requested that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The letter stated:

'The Council has acknowledged by its own admission that there is an issue with speed along the section of Walderslade Road that I have highlighted in my previous correspondence, by providing a mobile occasional speed camera unit apparently for a period of 10 years as claimed.

This is not an acceptable resolution, I have no recollection of such unit monitoring speed having lived in the area for over forty years.'

At the request of the lead petitioner and with the agreement of the Chairman of the committee, consideration of the matter was deferred to this meeting of the committee.

- 4.12 The Director has further commented as follows:

There is an existing mobile speed camera enforcement site in place at Walderslade Road. This enforcement site was introduced in during 2002 following consideration of the location's road casualty record. In line with central government rules and guidance on the deployment of speed cameras in place at the time, Medway Council in coordination with The Kent and Medway Safety Camera Partnership introduced periodic speed camera operation.

This was introduced in the interests of road casualty reduction. Medway Council has no powers or duty to enforce speed limits. Mobile speed cameras are operated by police staff on behalf of the Kent and Medway Safety Camera Partnership.

Speed camera warning signs are in place on Walderslade Road to highlight the use of speed cameras at this location to road users. There is a hard

standing area to the north of the junction of King George Road to accommodate the positioning of the mobile speed camera vehicle.

In the time that the mobile camera has been visiting this location casualty records indicate an overall reduction in casualty occurrence. Specifically, there has been a significant reduction in Killed or Serious Injury (KSI) casualties. In the five years before the site was introduced, five KSI casualties were recorded. In the last five years of available police records no Killed or Serious Injury collisions have been recorded.

The Council has a duty to investigate and undertake measures to prevent injury collision occurrence. At the current time there are other locations recording poorer injury collisions records that would be prioritised for casualty reduction intervention.

It is recommended that the current periodic speed camera operation should be continued. Following receipt of this petition the speed camera signing has been checked and maintained where appropriate to ensure it is visible for road users.

4.13 A petition to make the crossing on Rochester Road, Halling, safe

4.14 This petition containing 55 signatures was presented by Councillor Fearn at the meeting of Council on 21 July 2016. The petition states:

‘Item 1 – We urgently want a new central island crossing in a safer position in addition to the existing one located by the Elm Haven Marina layby. The new one must have a footpath on either side of the road and have clear view of traffic travelling in both directions.

Why it is important – This is very important because the road already carries a high volume of fast moving traffic and is facing a significant increase once the new river crossing opens later this year. The existing crossing is located in a place whereby a pedestrian cannot see the traffic travelling towards them; this is due to a bend in the road which creates a blind spot. Alarming, there is no footpath on one side as the island is adjacent to a layby full of parked cars forcing pedestrians to unsafely stand in the road in order to use the island. In addition to this, the dangers along this road are such that the majority of residents would not consider walking and therefore are forced to use their vehicles as their only means of transport. We have a considerable amount of older people too who would like to use the public transport system but are too afraid to cross the road. Therefore it would be extremely beneficial for everyone to make all aspects of road use safer.

Item 2 – We want the speed limit from the White Hart Public House through to St Andrews Park lowered to a safer 30mph with increased road signage. Whilst we the petitioners recognise the road is an important link road between the M2 and the M20 we are continuously faced with the dangers of fast moving traffic every time we leave our homes.

Considerations – Who does this really affect?

The only residents/properties affected are those that directly front onto Rochester Road between The White Hart through to just before St Andrews Park, which when you consider it is such a short distance, why shouldn't it be 30mph? For this short distance it would not cause huge hold ups. We ask why have the Highways Department put over six central islands down Sundridge Road when there are only two properties on either side that face directly onto the road? Why is it only now due to new housing projects that pedestrian safety issues are becoming high profile? Surely, it must be someone's job to be continuously reviewing all aspects of road safety in Medway? We reject and do not accept the arguments that there haven't been sufficient accidents/fatalities to support a lower speed limit and improve safety. The main cause of low accidents/incidents is because only the very brave dares to cross the road at the speeds vehicles currently pass our homes. Our local children are seriously at risk as they start to use the buses. Our older people are not confined to their homes being forced to stay in, how pitiful is this?

Conclusions – We understand that the Council will automatically put petitions over 12k signatures to Council. We are not even 12000 but we are just as important as anyone else and want the opportunity to be understood and listened to. Therefore the two proposals are in our opinion not unreasonable or dangerous. It will not impinge or be detrimental to the road users or anyone else.

Finally it is not about people's likes, wants or feelings of importance. It is about "making it a better place to live", keeping our families and loved ones as safe as possible, which in time with reduced speed, living proof will show the benefits, will far outweigh the negatives.'

4.15 The Director of Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation responded to the lead petitioner on 4 August 2016 as follows:

'Firstly, concerning the existing central island near the Elm Haven Marina layby, this was introduced primarily for traffic management purposes. Similarly, the majority of the islands at Sundridge Hill are traffic islands, typically providing protection for the numerous right turn lanes and/or deterring overtaking manoeuvres. These islands can of course be used by pedestrians wishing to cross the road, however, they may not necessarily have been introduced for, nor promoted for that purpose. I note that the current island near the Marina is not served by a footway on one side.

To consider this request for the introduction of a pedestrian refuge island we would need to assess the site formally. This allows us to consider the physical possibilities of a pedestrian refuge island along with other potential factors, including costs. We will investigate this further and report back to you in due course, via our Highway Engineers.

Secondly, in relation to the current speed limit on this route, there are many factors that are taken into account when setting speed limits, including traffic function and composition, location, environmental and local characteristics, traffic speeds, collision history, and national guidance. It is important that

speed limits are appropriate and the setting of speed limits is based on an assessment process.

I can confirm that we will undertake a Speed Limit Review of the section in question (the White Hart public house to St Andrews Park) to assess the current speed limit. The review will be carried out during this financial year and the findings will be reported to you as lead petitioner once the review is concluded. I highlight, however, that any recommendations resulting from the review would be subject to funding availability.

We take all concerns for road safety seriously and act to improve safety wherever possible. Road safety improvements must always relate to casualty reduction. As sadly, hundreds of road casualties are recorded on Medway's roads every year, whilst the Council has made good long term progress in driving down casualties, this is achieved by targeting the locations with the poorest road safety records first. We continually monitor the safety record of all roads in Medway and target improvements to those locations with a history of road casualties. We also actively pursue road safety investment wherever possible, such as the nearby St Andrews Park development. This has seen additional central islands introduced, and a lower (40mph) speed limit proposed.'

- 4.16 On 8 August 2016, the lead petitioner requested that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The email stated:

'I have received a response from Richard Hicks, Director Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation and whilst there has been some positivity indicated we would like this matter to be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.'

- 4.17 The Director has further commented as follows:

Following due consideration of the petition and associated requests; for the introduction of a new pedestrian island and the lowering of the current speed limit on the A228, the Council has committed to undertake a formal site review, along with a speed limit review to investigate and assess these requests in detail. These are additional unplanned work streams that will be completed within this financial year.

Since the submission of the petition, officers from the Road Safety Team have corresponded with and spoken to the lead petitioner to discuss and explain the investigations the Council has committed to undertake.

The findings of these investigations will be reported to the lead petitioner upon completion.

4.18 A petition objecting to the new pavements of William Street, Rainham

- 4.19 This petition containing 18 signatures was presented by Councillor Carr at the meeting of Council on 21 July 2016. The petition states:

'We the undersigned residents of William Street hereby express our dissatisfaction with the newly constructed footpaths in William Street in that

they slope at varying angles towards the road surface putting at risk people such as children in pushchairs, the elderly, the disabled and particularly the users of mobility scooters who might be thrown into the road. We wish both new footpaths to be reconstructed to provide a continuous level surface between garden wall and kerb from end to end of our road, with vehicular crossings having a dropped kerb – as in Taswell and Station Roads.'

4.20 The Director of Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation responded to the lead petitioner on 4 August 2016 as follows:

'I am sorry that you and some of the residents of William Street are dissatisfied with the pavement, together with your request that they be rebuilt to provide a continuous level surface from the back of the pavement to the kerb's edge along the entire length of the road, with car crossings having a dropped kerb as is the case in Taswell Road and Station Road. I am aware that our Engineers who undertake these schemes consider every user of the pavement, together with those residents that park their vehicles off road. They will always endeavour to make improvements within the parameters and constraints of the existing footway.

The width of the pavement in William Street is particularly narrow, generally 1.2m along most of its length, the levels at the back of the pavement and of the road surface are fixed and all of these constraints had been considered and taken into account in these works. The engineer looking after the scheme spoke directly to you and your neighbour and made specific alterations to the pavement outside and in the vicinity of house numbers 67 and 69. He also spoke directly to the resident of number 84 and made improvements to her vehicular crossover. Throughout the duration of the works he has made contact with a number of other residents and acceded where possible to their requests.

A gradient of at least 2.5% or 1:40, falling towards the road is required as a minimum for every pavement to discharge rain water towards the road. Where there is a requirement to drop the front kerbs for vehicular access, the gradient will generally be increased due to the difference in levels; every effort has been made to keep the gradient as shallow as possible. The style of vehicular crossing installed here is the standard type and has been used throughout Medway for many years. It has a natural continuous flow with the footway, eliminates the use of short steep ramps with excessive gradient hazards for users of the pavement.

Turning now to your comparison to the vehicular crossings in Taswell Road, the Engineer confirms that the pavement and vehicle crossings have been constructed in the same manner, with a similar specification. The increased width of pavement enables the gradient to be shallower and less obvious. You may, however, be referring to the areas of Taswell Road where vehicles are crossing the footway illegally (without a drop kerb); in these locations the kerbs are at a normal height with no change to the gradient and are unapproved crossing points. Station Road, in the vicinity of William Street, is mainly terraced housing and has only one vehicular crossing which provides access into the public house. All other parking is "on road", hence the continuous level surface.

I do feel we have taken into account consideration for all users of the pavement and whilst understanding your concerns, the pavement has been constructed to a good standard that allows the freedom of passage to all without restriction. Given the limited width of the footway, it is difficult for two pedestrians to pass each other at any given point; to construct a continuous level surface throughout would create unacceptable gradients at each vehicle crossing point that may restrict pedestrian movement and prove hazardous to others.

I am sorry this is not the response you were seeking, but I hope I have explained our position and rationale to you.

4.21 On 6 July 2016, the lead petitioner requested that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The letter is attached at Appendix 2.

4.22 The Director has further commented as follows:

The Council wrote to all of the residents in William Street on the 27 May informing them of the impending works to the pavement.

Prior to all such schemes the engineer responsible initially inspects the pavement and will have a number of subsequent meetings with any residents who have made contact, the term maintenance contractor who is undertaking the work and a senior engineer.

In terms of the gradient of at least 2.5% or 1:40 this has been a design standard for pavements for over 40 years and is used by Local Authorities and developers.

The style of crossing (winged type) is adopted throughout the industry; there are examples of the type of crossing the lead petitioner refers to in Medway, however, these are usually adjacent to wide pavements where the slope of the crossing is a gentle incline. The quadrant used at each corner of this older style crossing creates a potentially hazardous trip for pedestrians and is being engineered out when pavement schemes are undertaken.

The existing vehicle crossings were of the winged type and have been replaced like for like, with the exception that the dropped kerbs at the front of the crossing have been raised to a maximum height to decrease the gradient.

The problems the lead petitioner has highlighted stem from the narrow width of the pavement (1.2m) and the height at the back of the pavement of the resident's hard stand for off road parking. The engineer is left with two levels, top of kerb at the front and the height of the hard stand at the back, which he has to match into.

The road was micro-surfaced in May 2012. This process increases skid resistance and prevents water getting into the sub-base, therefore prolonging the life of the road.

The engineer supervising the scheme met with the lead petitioner and other residents whilst the works were undertaken and made some adjustments to levels as requested and where possible.

In summary, the newly constructed pavement in William Street is to a good standard; we have considered all users given the restrictions imposed by the narrowness of the pavement and varying levels. I apologise that the pavement doesn't, however, meet the expectations of some of the residents.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 The Council has a clear scheme for handling petitions set out in its Constitution. This ensures consistency and clarity of process, minimising the risk of complaints about the administration of petitions.

6. Financial and Legal Implications

- 6.1 Any financial implications arising from the issues raised by the petitions are set out in the comments on the petitions.
- 6.2 Overview and Scrutiny Rule 21.1 (xiv) in the Council's Constitution provides that the terms of reference of this Committee include the power to deal with petitions referred to the Committee under and in accordance with the Council's petition scheme.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1 The Committee is requested to note the petition responses and appropriate officer actions in paragraphs 3 of the report.
- 7.2 The Committee is requested to consider the petition referral requests and the Director's comments at paragraph 4 of the report.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Request for review by the Committee - Petition regarding reduced opening hours for the Strand Swimming Pool.

Appendix 2 – Request for review by the Committee - Petition objecting to the new pavements of William Street, Rainham.

Background papers:

None



Appendix 1

FRIENDS OF THE STRAND POOL, c/o
Kent, I

14th August 2016

Head of Democratic Services
Medway Council
Gun Wharf, Dock Road
Chatham, Kent
ME4 4TR

Dear Sirs

Re: Petition presented to Council regarding reduced opening hours for the Strand Swimming Pool

You will be aware of this public petition, formally presented to the Council Meeting of 21st July, 2016. I write on behalf of the lead petitioner, Ms. Victoria Hill, and the user group set up to represent Strand Pool customer interests, the Friends of the Strand Pool.

We have received a response from Richard Hicks, Director Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation, and held a further meeting with the Head of Sport, Leisure and Tourism, Bob Dimond. We are grateful for their input but remain dissatisfied that the Council's position appears to be unchanged.

The Friends group was only established in June, following the discovery that Pool opening hours were to be significantly reduced from previous seasons. This decision, taken without consultation with users or Councillors, was communicated only via a simple 'opening hours' panel on the Council website, and was a surprise to all users.

The Friends' initial concern, and the subject of the public petition, was for this decision to be reconsidered. However, other issues with the Pool quickly became evident, and we wish to have these wider issues considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as follows:

The Pool was not cleaned and prepared ready for opening day on May 28th.

The Pool bottom quickly became dirty and slippery, leading to minor injuries from slips and falls, and customers requesting refunds.

The Friends' investigation immediately led to the conclusion that Pool staff were not operating the river water filtration system correctly, and the staff generally had no idea what their responsibilities should be. Any visual inspection of the plant room should concern those responsible for Health and Safety implementation, and local management has been lax in the extreme until the recent temporary appointment of an experienced Manager.

The failure to operate the existing filtration system (deemed adequate for purpose by an experienced pool engineer engaged by the Friends) was exacerbated by the spell of warmer weather of the 16th to 20th July when the visible algae levels in the water and on the Pool bottom were completely unacceptable, with families taking one look and leaving the Pool with refunds. A limited number of young children then 'suffered blisters' which were blamed on 'chemicals' or to the 'dreadful conditions' at the Pool, claims that attracted very negative local press and heavy social media criticism. Whilst the children's blisters were more likely caused by sunburn, the Pool presentation could not be defended. This episode has severely damaged the Pool's reputation as a safe and pleasant place for families to visit.

Communication of the revised opening hours, even when the Pool was open, has been haphazard and incomplete. Customers have turned up after travelling from outside the Borough to find it closed, and others have been turned away an hour prior to closing time, despite understanding that they would swim and leave in that time. Initially, no noticeboard or updated information was available on site, though this has since been arranged.

The measurement of customer throughput from previous seasons, upon which the Council's Sport, Leisure and Tourism department have based their analysis of 'demand' is fundamentally flawed. The Friends group have

experienced and been advised of many occasions where customers have entered the Pool without any member of staff recording the fact. Cash is taken at the entrance, but receipts have not been issued for at least five years, leaving a serious question mark over the veracity of the measured throughput. To this day, some visitors are being allowed in without payment.

The Pool attracts a reasonable number of City Card holders, but there does not seem to be any correlation between the number of City Card users and the financial subsidy that we understand is made to the Pool's accounts.

Indeed, it has become clear that the Council does not differentiate financially between the Pool and the wider Strand Park, historically treating them as one entity. We recognise the extra complexity of allocating costs accurately given the flexible nature of the jobs and the need to cover roles where there is demand, but the Council must recognise that some of the figures used to 'justify' the reduction in hours are highly questionable. Specifically, the oft-repeated claim in responses to the Friends' enquiries that '£70,000 more than the previous season' was spent on staff in 2015 is plainly wrong. (Given the maximum 4 month season for the Pool, this would equate to extra annual salaries of £210,000 or 10 additional staff at £21k per annum...).

There are other issues relating to the day-to-day running of the Pool, but the Friends are happy to work with Sport, Leisure and Tourism to deal with these as they occur, and have arranged group clean-up sessions to help. We do recognise that improvements have been made recently, and that a greater understanding of the issues is being demonstrated by senior Officers.

But no effective marketing of the Strand Pool is undertaken on a regular and ongoing basis. Local people frequently comment that they did not know the Pool existed. The Friends have begun the process to establish a dedicated website and social media presence, enabling information about opening times, special events, and other relevant matters to be accessible to all. These initiatives are already reaching around 350 people regularly, with peaks of 1300+ at present. This will increase as word spreads and is the only medium in place to get the message across.

The Friends represent a wide range of serious, cold water swimmers, early morning users, mums with pre-school age children, older pupils, students and working people who would like to swim after school, college or work, and older users to whom the Strand Pool has been a social lifeline for years.

There are other potential user groups (Scouts, Schools, Clubs etc, plus private parties) that are not currently being encouraged.

Established data from the ASA ('The Economics of Swimming') suggest that the financial benefit to Public Health services is around £12,000 per regular swimmer aged over 65. The benefits of open-air and salt-water swimming to mental health and skin condition are recognised nationally by health professionals.

Medway has the benefit of a working, attractive and historic Lido that simply needs to be managed properly and marketed effectively. This does not have to cost substantial investment – we fully expect that the Council's subsidy can be reduced over time and should be eliminated altogether in due course.

Simply 'saving money' by reducing hours is short sighted and will have the effect of reducing visitor numbers even more. The evidence provided to support this decision is flawed and should not be relied on, particularly when there is a national increased interest in Lidos, with local authorities refurbishing and re-opening their facilities.

Medway does not need to invest heavily, but simply to open the Strand Pool daily from end May to early September and measure the numbers accurately.

The Friends have already committed to clean and paint the Pool during the Spring, ready for next season, and to help with the filtration management to ensure that customers are presented with a clean and attractive environment, and to encourage greater use by the wider community.

Finally, we would like to remind Members of the 5,500 mainly local people who took the time to support our petition. We have found this level of support to be somewhat humbling and indicative of the amazing support that exists for the Pool. We believe that, managed and promoted properly, this much-loved facility can begin to pay its way, for the benefit of all.

Therefore, we request the opportunity for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review our petition at their October meeting and to consider recommending a fresh approach for the Strand Pool in 2017.

Yours faithfully

William Street
Rainham
Gillingham

July 6th 2016

Head of Democratic Services
Medway Council

Dear Sir,

Petition: Objections to the new pavements of William Street, Rainham

I hereby ask for a review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the decision on our petition because the Director Regeneration, Culture, Environment and Transformation has refused our request for the reconstruction of a **continuous level walkway** along both footpaths of William Street, Rainham.

I have done my best to avoid this situation. Before work began, I contacted the Council and asked for improvements on the old footpaths, asking for a continual level walking surface for pedestrians to be constructed; to no effect.

So when I saw how the new work was going, I contacted as many residents as I could, to ask their opinion and maybe petition the Council. Of those I could speak to, all except four, signed up. In all, 82% were unhappy both with the old pavements and the new. This afternoon, I happened to see my next-door neighbour who was on holiday earlier and could not sign. I asked him how he liked the new footpaths. He replied in two words. "They slope".

Now I realise that what we are asking would not be easy to implement, considering the varying ground level heights of properties, the narrowness of the paths and the comparatively low road surface. I believe that the engineers have done their best according to their instructions. They have certainly been most helpful and courteous. But the result is that the new paths replicate most of the problems of the old ones. They do not best serve our needs. Many residents did not use the old paths; mostly, they walked in the road.

I believe that the Council could have done better on three counts.

1. The Council should have canvassed the opinions of the residents before they commissioned the work. Residents know the local environment better than anyone. The Council should have listened. The Council should have inspected the road more carefully, if they did at all.
2. In his letter to me Mr Hicks wrote "A gradient of at least 2.5% or 1:40, falling towards the road is required as a minimum for every pavement to discharge rain water towards the road".

Now I cannot believe this. Even if the footpath were perfectly level, I believe you would *not be able* to retain any water on a plane surface for more than a few seconds. Where did this instruction come from?

Other pavements appear not to follow this rule. It happened that on August 4th, I was a passenger in a car enabling me to attend a London hospital appointment. As we drove very slowly through busy narrow residential streets between Denmark Hill and Blackheath, I scrutinised footpaths of many kinds, wide or narrow, paved or tarmac and *nowhere* did I recognise a pavement like those of William Street with a gradient towards the road!

My daughter's family live in west London and their pavements are *narrow and level* and without problems.

In addition, had the Council perhaps realised, William Street has a downward slope towards each end and especially towards Taswell Road. As in Station Road, there is a natural slope, so no artificial gradient should have been required.

3. Mr Hicks continues: "The style of vehicular crossing installed here is the standard type and has been used for many years".

Maybe, but tradition does not necessarily mean *safety, convenience, or best practice*. Pedestrians can cope with a slope that varies *up and down* as they walk, but not necessarily *one that slopes even more strongly than the rest of the footpath laterally - across the whole walkway*. With a drop kerb it is surely only the section near the kerb that should slope.

Paths should surely be suitable for most pedestrians, but these are unsafe for children on scooters, etc., for wheelchairs, for elderly walkers perhaps with poor balance and the disabled. Even joggers cannot cope!

As it is, many residents walk in the roadway instead.

4. And next time the road is resurfaced, it would help the vehicular crossings if the road surface was raised as much as possible to reduce the slope to the drop kerb. This raising did not happen to any great extent at the last resurfacing.

If requirements 2 and 3 were put into effect, residents would have a much safer and more user-friendly walkway. As it is, cars and even water, get precedence over people in what is supposedly **a footpath!**

William Street residents have patiently put up with inconvenient and dangerous pavements much too long already, perhaps for forty years or more which is the time that I have lived here. We shouldn't have to continue for many more years to walk in a narrow, ever busier roadway that is also a bus route.

Our needs should finally be addressed.

