

EXECUTIVE

Tuesday 24 June 2025

Present:

Councillor Philip Bialyk (Chair)

Councillors Wright, Asvachin, Foale, Patrick, Vizard, Williams, R and Wood

Also Present:

Councillor Haigh (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor Holland (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor M. Mitchell (as an opposition group Leader); and

Councillor Moore (as an opposition group Leader).

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Place, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Strategic Director of Operations, Strategic Director for People and Communities, Head of Culture and Leisure, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer and Democratic Services Officer(LS)

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

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MATTERS REFERRED BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Leader, Councillor Bialyk presented the recommendations and stated that these would be addressed within the item on the agenda.

“The Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 23 June 2025 recommend that:

- the Executive discuss the possibility of community ownership with the Northbrook Trust and interested parties including community groups.
- the VAT reclaim be investigated to see how a portion might be reinvested in the future of the Northbrook Pool.”

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CLOSURE OF NORTHBROOK SWIMMING POOL

The Strategic Director for Place presented the report and gave a presentation (slides attached), making the following points:

- no decision had been taken to close the pool at the time of budget-setting, nor until full consultation and impact assessment had been carried out;
- there was a legal requirement to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment(EQIA);
- a balance must be struck between reductions in the leisure service aside maintaining the pool;
- a saving was required to maintain a legally balanced budget;
- the spend on Northbrook Pool was more than the income raised through use of the pool;
- the Building was owned by the Northbrook Community Trust and leased to the Council, with 70-years remaining;
- a significant investment in the building was necessary to bring the building up to industry standards;

- investment to reduce carbon emissions was necessary and to make the building DDA compliant;
- the financial case for works was based on estimates as quotes were not available at this time;
- the public consultation detail could be found at Appendix B. Time and effort had gone into the design of the consultation to receive rich qualitative data and understand the real life impacts;
- the EQIA could be found at Appendix C and highlighted the negative impacts on those with protected characteristics;
- a closure plan would be a technical process and would support leisure members and users (including schools) to transition to other leisure facilities, including our other two swimming pools and to utilise the portfolio of services the council had;
- the council was fortunate to have dedicated, knowledgeable staff and if necessary there would be a process to protect them utilising the organisational change process; and
- there would be a de-commissioning process which would include emptying the pool and officers would work with Members and users, including schools, and listen, support and enable them to continue at other facilities.

During discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and questions:

- concern for those with autism and mental health conditions was highlighted and it was asked whether groups were consulted with when SSP was designed;
- as part of mitigation could staff arrange a quiet, relaxed session for those with autism or SEND children or adults to see the other pool and have a swim as some anxiety maybe around not knowing what to expect;
- how much would it cost to bring the pool back to a state of repair in accordance with the lease in order to hand back;
- the portfolio holder, Councillor Wood stated that a good discussion had been held at the Customer Focus Scrutiny meeting and that he was proud of the leisure service with 5 large centres and one smaller one which had seen 1.8million visits over the last year and asked how many people had attended Northbrook, relative to this number;
- Northbrook represented 9% of the Council's carbon emissions and asked that the reason for decarbonisation funding having been unsuccessful or not pursued be reiterated;
- how many pools within the Exeter area were open to the public;
- Councillor Ruth Williams speaking as ward councillor for the area confirmed that she had personally put up posters and information in various newsletters which went to everyone within the ward;
- what work was done to try different hours and sessions to endeavour to improve usage of the pool;
- how did Exeter compare to other areas with regard to swimming facilities; and
- how likely would it be that Exeter would qualify for funding held within new Government announced fund of £200 million for sport and would this likely be for capital or revenue.

In response to questions raised the Strategic Director for Place and Head of Culture and Leisure advised that:

- there had been a thorough process in the project build for SSP and a multitude of groups and individual users were consulted with and were incorporated into the early project brief;
- a quiet, relaxed session could be organised and possibly a focus group with users as well as looking at different times of day;

- there were 83 registered members of Northbrook Pool and the visits represented 0.7% of the total leisure visits;
- there were changes in provision at some private organisations across the city with two primary schools about to open their pools to the public and one private organisation looking to close theirs as well as changes to the university pools. There were 6 or 7 private pools available for public use in addition to other Exeter City Council pools;
- school holidays had been targeted with a digital campaign as well as digital screens across other facilities to raise awareness of Northbrook pool and attempt to drive customers to it as well as working with schools and ward councillors;
- staff had been willing to change their hours in order to support the process of attempts to improve usage but unfortunately this had not seen an increase;
- Cornwall had closed majority of their leisure centres after the pandemic as had other local authorities;
- Exeter's had been brought back in-house for residents therefore Exeter was in a better place than neighbouring authorities, including having the first Passivhaus leisure centre, however ECC were working towards a cost-neutral leisure service; and
- guidance on Government funding was not detailed as yet but it was unlikely to be for capital and more likely for sporting events.

The Leader made the following statement:

"Colleagues, the recommendation before us this evening is to close Northbrook swimming pool.

Let me say firstly that this is not a decision we would have wanted to have to consider, and I think I can speak for all of Executive as well the ward members and I know members more widely that we have had numerous conversations and sleepless night over this.

Ideally, I would have wanted to take this decision for all members at full Council, but I have been advised by officers that this is a matter reserved for Executive.

Members though have had the opportunity to participate in the discussion at Scrutiny last night as well as engage with users and the community through our consultation.

It however falls to the Labour administration of this council via this Executive committee to consider this difficult decision.

I reflect sometimes that for all the great benefits that we have delivered and will continue to deliver in Exeter, it must be more comfortable to be in opposition where many thoughtful suggestions might be made in the knowledge that the tough decisions have to be made by others.

Our leisure service covers the whole city, and we govern for the whole city. We must do what's best for all the residents in Exeter, and not just one part of it.

The leisure service in Exeter has been on a journey for some time. We took it back in-house from a private contractor in 2020, the year that the pandemic struck, which of course had a massive impact on leisure services amongst so many others, we managed to keep going.

We have studied the report in depth, carefully considered the consultation results and had full regard to the Equality Impact Assessment.

We have also all listened to the issues raised at last night's Scrutiny Committee.

The key facts though are:

- there is low usage of the pool, compared to its high running costs,
- there is a significant capital investment needed to bring the building up to acceptable modern standards in order to make it accessible for disabled people and reduce carbon emissions both of which are essential.

The figures in the report speak for themselves as uncomfortable as they are. It would cost an estimated £2.1 million to bring the pool up to modern standards which cannot be ignored.

That's £2.1 million that would need to be found from somewhere else as well as continuing to support the pool; we simply do not have the budget for that.

Even if we accepted the ongoing heavy subsidy that we use to support the pool, it is simply not acceptable to operate a facility that does not comply with the Disability Discrimination Act or the Equality Act.

We took the service back in house because we wanted to create the best possible facilities for the people of Exeter.

When you look at the quality of the offer across the city and the membership we have, we have indeed been successful.

We've invested heavily in the leisure service - and will continue to do so - because health and wellbeing of all residents in Exeter is a key priority.

I remind you of the facilities we have at the Arena, close by, also plans for Wonford which are still not funded at this time. These are important things that we need to do for the health and wellbeing of the people of our city.

We also know that swimming is an important part of the national curriculum, and we will continue to work with local schools to ensure that we provide our children with a safe and welcoming environment in our other two pools, so they can continue their swimming lessons.

I am very proud of the fact that in 2024 more than 2,500 young children learnt to swim at St Sidwell's Point and more than 2,000 young children learnt to swim at Riverside. 4500 across the city in one year.

The city will continue to be served by two fantastic publicly owned swimming pools which have received heavy investment to ensure they have long-term viability. This is something we are simply not just able to do at Northbrook. As the report highlights, since 2020 we have provided £686,130.99 subsidy.

We have carried out extensive promotional and marketing campaigns, but despite best efforts of all people including councillors and local people, usage has remained low, and this has been the case for a long time.

This year councillors were asked to identify £3.5 million savings to set a balanced budget.

The need for savings from the leisure service was identified, and officers began a major consultation to assess the impact of the potential closure of Northbrook.

The consultation was extremely thorough, and I have looked carefully at the results which are highlighted in detail in the report.

We have carried out an impact assessment and I fully understand that some vulnerable people, including those with protected characteristics will be impacted by this decision, and of course we all regret this and do everything we can to mitigate. If Executive decides to close Northbrook Pool this evening, our officers will work hard to ensure that all barriers to people accessing our other facilities are removed, wherever it is possible to do so.

If agreed tonight, the closure process could take up to 12-weeks. This will give officers time set up focus groups, talk with teachers and engage leisure members to work out ways to help people transition to St Sidwell's and Riverside pools. We are fortunate in having committed and knowledgeable staff at our leisure centres, who can facilitate this process.

I have noted one of the recommendations which was proposed by Councillor Parkhouse and agreed at last night's Scrutiny Committee, that the Executive discuss the possibility of community ownership with the Northbrook Trust and interested parties including community groups.

Should the Executive decide to close Northbrook Swimming Pool this evening, I would like to propose adding this additional recommendation, by asking officers to reach out to the Trust who own the facility and for those discussions, together with local stakeholders.

The additional recommendation would read:

"This council is committed to assisting in the facilitation of this. But of course, it would be a matter for any group coming forward and we will support where we can." I would also like to propose an amendment to the second recommendation to indicate that the decision will be delegated to the Strategic Director in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, which is myself.

On the second recommendation from Scrutiny related to the use of a VAT refund; this refund is being held in order to protect the council's financial position in the situation where the council may be approached to make a refund. I cannot place fast and loose with the finances of the Council at this stage.

This issue will be further explored in setting the budget for next year in which all members are involved.

I stress again, the Council has a duty to do what's best for the whole city with the resources available and as difficult as it is, I will be accepting, with a great deal of regret, the recommendation to close the pool."

During further discussion, Members of the Executive Committee made the following points:

- that this was a very difficult decision;
- there was conflicting information in circulation making it difficult for residents;
- Northbrook had served the city well for any years;
- if there were unlimited funds available Northbrook would remain and add one in every ward but money was extremely tight with savings to be made;
- each centre and their sustainability had been looked at;
- it was of note that a wheelchair-using male could not access Northbrook at all and those with accessibility needs did not have a dignified way to use the pool;
- Members had visited the pool;

- community spirit had grown around the use of the pool and a group now met in the Isca centre;
- levels of pools usage had been calculated by Swim England;
- There appeared four issues – potential staff redundancies, schools, SEND and subsidies;
- the building was not able to accommodate those with disabilities well;
- efforts would be made to include the five schools within the timetable at SSP;
- no-one wanted to close swimming pools but there could be an opportunity for the passionate community to look into the running of the facility;
- the special scrutiny meeting had been welcomed as it had allowed the gathering of more information to support the decision;
- more people could be impacted should a decision be taken not to close Northbrook;
- personal stories had been captured at focus groups and additional needs could be addressed at other existing pools; and
- usage was too low to sustain the pool.

All Members of the Executive thanked the petitioners for the amount of effort and work they had put into the campaign and welcomed hearing from them.

The Head of Culture and Leisure clarified that the figure of 1.8 million was visits to leisure facilities rather than individual people. Children with education needs were able to be given a better experience at centres other than Northbrook.

Opposition group leaders made and raised the following questions and points:

- the financial pressures were recognised;
- asked for support for the amendment and that the community be given the opportunity to bring forward a charitable model;
- was there a financial penalty for ending the lease;
- that it be formally noted that there was a duty of care to support officers who must bring difficult decisions before Members and a culture must be fostered where officers feel safe within and outside the Council;
- hope that there were lessons which could be learnt from this process;
- disappointed that community asset transfer had not been considered;
- what other parts of leisure would be impacted as it appeared that £586,000 would not be saved; and
- what were the arrangements for reporting back following discussions with community groups.

The Leader responded stating that further investigation would be needed regarding VAT and that an ear-marked reserve would be a matter for Council. He stated that he would meet with Directors to keep up to date with discussions regarding the potential future of the pool.

The Leader asked that Members of the Executive Committee consider the points raised by the opposition leaders.

A short break was taken at 7.30pm and the meeting reconvened at 7:36pm.

The Leader moved the recommendations as amended, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously.

Agreed:

RESOLVED that:

1. the Executive agrees to the of closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool, based on the consideration of key income and expenditure reports, information gathered following public consultation and the Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA).
2. the Executive delegates authority to the Strategic Director for Place, in consultation with the Leader to undertake the closure of the facility.
3. that support is provided to existing members and users, including local schools, in transitioning to alternative Exeter Leisure facilities.
4. any increase in costs to the Leisure Services to be reported back to the Executive and Council for approval.
5. as recommended by Scrutiny, Executive asks officers to facilitate a discussion with the Northbrook Trust and interested parties, including community groups, on the possibility of community ownership.

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PARKING PLACES ORDER

The Executive received the report which sought to make amendments under the Parking Places Order to improve the regulation of Council car parks and to support the aims of reducing traffic congestion.

Reference was made to:

- the proposal being to begin consultation on the amendments to the Parking Places Order which would take place in line with statutory requirements which maybe short than, but would comply with the Consultation Charter;
- £75,000 income was being requested but this was a Council function; and
- Should the proposal be agreed this would incorporated into the budget monitoring.

During discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and questions:

- Would this come back to the Executive for approval;
- Last year a decision had been made having listened to the public;
- What type of carbon reduction measure were there surrounding car parking;
- A typographical error in the recommendation was pointed out; and
- Would there be tracking to determine whether there had been higher footfall within the city centre as a result.

In response to questions raised the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources advised that:

- The proposal was seeking delegated authority so there would be no need to come before the Executive again, if approved;
- Detailed carbon reduction measures would be provided;
- The typographical error would be corrected;
- The new Head of Service had ideas and was actively exploring ways to reduce ASB;
- If the proposals were adopted following consultation then a recommendation would be made to Council; and
- It was early days since the introduction of the reduced Sunday charge but tracking was undertaken and would be monitored.

Opposition group leaders made and raised the following questions and points:

- Was the policy to pursue car parking charges maximising income;
- How would this proposal reduce emissions in the city;
- If charges increased further, would people shop from home more or go where there is no charge;
- It was good that the cost of Ringgo would be passed to users;
- Car parks were the largest income stream, was this as large as council tax; and
- They would not wish to deter footfall into the city.

In response to the opposition leaders comments the Leader reminded Members that a year ago charges had not been increased regardless of this being a substantial revenue stream and that he would talk to Directors about the policy.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources stated that there was a responsibility to keep traffic moving in the city and that increasing charges may act as a deterrent meaning some people may consider alternative forms of transport. Car Parking charges were the single largest income stream and there was a balance to be struck in support everyone, including the local economy.

The Leader moved the recommendations as amended, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously.

Agreed:

RESOLVED to:

1. amend the Car Park Places Order 2014 as follows:
 - a) Increase car parking charges at all car parks as detailed in 8.2 of the report;
 - b) To pass the transaction charge for using the Ringgo App to the user;
 - c) To move the following car parks from Zone 1 to Central Zone
 - a. Howell Road;
 - b. Triangle;
 - d) £75,000 of the income achieved from Car Parks to be set aside for maintenance, improvements and carbon reduction measures to city centre car parks.
2. delegate authority to consider the responses to the consultation and determine whether to implement the Order (or parts thereof) to the Head of Service Commercial Assets in consultation with the Strategic Director Corporate Resources and Leader of the Council.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.52 pm)

Chair