

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY 15 JANUARY 2008

BOWLING GREENS IN EXETER

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update the committee on the provision of bowling greens.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Three years ago the Council considered the declining take-up of bowls at its five directly controlled greens as measured by the number of season tickets sold. The leisure section instituted a two-year support programme to reverse the trend. This programme was partially successful, and last year in reviewing the results the Scrutiny Committee asked to look again in a year's time to review trends further.
- 2.2 In the season just ended the clubs sold roughly the same number of season tickets as last year and the year before.

3. DISCUSSION

- 3.1 Since last year officers have met the clubs on several occasions to discuss the issues, and believe the situation can be described in the following terms:
- 3.2 The clubs believe very strongly that measuring their success and value for money by the number of season tickets is not an accurate or fair measure. This measure shows that each season ticket is subsidised by £162 per annum, without taking account of central charges. Prolonged discussion has failed to produce a criterion for value for money which the clubs would accept or implement. Officers proposed an informal measure of take-up of green slots, based on a maximum usage of perhaps 12 games per rink per week, but the clubs, who would have to collect the information, have declined to co-operate.
- 3.3 The clubs also stated initially that low quality of greens either discourages new members, or leads improving players to leave for private clubs. However the green generally agreed to be the most satisfactory to its members appears not to differ substantially from the others in terms of membership. Officers have proposed the idea of clubs taking over the management of the maintenance for themselves, and receiving a grant to do so, but no club has accepted the invitation to discuss this further during the last three years. At a recent meeting between all the clubs and the Council's parks and open spaces management, held specifically to discuss maintenance of greens and pavilions, the quality of the greens was not raised.
- 3.4 Discussions on more general developments which would enable the clubs to take more of their destiny into their own hands have similarly not borne fruit. The secret of success of the private clubs in the city seems to lie in their independence, their

ability to run a bar and manage their own maintenance, but the five municipal clubs are not keen to follow that route, perhaps via a long lease and grant aid.

- 3.5 Clubs have made considerable efforts to bring more people into the game, and have worked together on a free bowls week, as well as other individual initiatives. They have also requested better signing and communication, and a more pro-active approach from the City Council, much of which we have been able to provide.

4. ANALYSIS

- 4.1 There are two key issues which the Council needs to consider. Firstly the viability and value for money provided by the five existing clubs, and secondly the potential offered by new outdoor facilities attached to the Isca Centre, which has established itself very firmly as a centre of excellence in the indoor game.

- 4.2 The Isca Centre's development committee recently produced some development proposals which suggested that the way forward for bowls in the City was for the Pines Gardens and Belmont greens to close, the former to share the St Thomas green with the St Thomas club; and the latter to move to a new green to be built outside the Isca Centre, where Whipton, Belmont and a possible new Isca Outdoor club would share two greens. In terms of resource usage this has much to commend it, as it keeps the clubs' identities, removes parking, facilities and security problems, and builds on the success of the indoor bowls centre.

- 4.3 However the clubs would not agree to any initiatives which mean the loss of their current homes. If this happened, unused greens would be reincorporated into the parks within which they are sited. The clubs, even though they draw their membership from wider than their immediate neighbourhoods, do also have close links with those neighbourhoods.

- 4.4 The opportunity remains to establish new high quality facilities associated with the Isca Centre anyway, with the possible support of the private City of Exeter Club, which no longer has a green, but the change in availability of capital funding means that the City Council itself is not likely to be able to make any great financial contribution.

5. PROPOSALS

- 5.1 The clubs maintain that usage of their greens is high, and that the numbers of season tickets sold are not indicative of usage. In the absence of better information, we have to rely on the fixture lists, which certainly demonstrate good levels of use. Nor do the clubs have any appetite at all for change. Given this situation we would recommend that the Council does not pursue any further initiatives, and continues to support the clubs in their efforts to maintain their memberships and playing standards. In the event that one or more of the clubs eventually finds it difficult to carry on, and there is no evidence at present that any do, the Council should think again about how many and which greens it should support.

5.2 However officers should continue to work with the board of the Isca Centre to develop their ideas, and assist them in identifying possible funding sources as and when their proposals become sufficiently formed.

6. RECOMMENDED

- (1) That the Bowls Clubs be thanked for their co-operation and supported in their efforts to attract new members and improve their standards.
- (2) That officers assist the Isca Centre in its development programme.

HEAD OF LEISURE & MUSEUMS

S:PA/LP/ Committee/108SCC7 v2
3.1.08

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended) Background papers used in compiling this report:

None