



**Cabinet**

**Tuesday, 13 July 2021**

**Rushcliffe Arena Facilities Review**

## **Report of the Director – Neighbourhoods**

**Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Communities and Climate Change,  
Councillor A Brennan**

### **1. Purpose of report**

- 1.1. This report presents the declining usage of the indoor bowls facility at Rushcliffe Arena and considers alternative options for the space to support increased usage.
- 1.2. The report seeks approval for the closure of the indoor bowls facility in its current format, and a basic conversion of the space to enable uses such as short mat bowls, group exercise and events, both sporting and non-sporting, to serve a wider demographic of users and further support the leisure industry post Covid.

### **2. Recommendation**

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- a) approves the closure of the current indoor bowls facility;
- b) approves a basic conversion of the hall to a multi-functional sports and event space at a cost of £60k; and
- c) supports officers' work in mitigating the loss of the facility in its current format by offering further support to remaining Bowls Club members including exploring the introduction of short mat bowls at the Arena.

### **3. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 3.1. Rushcliffe Indoor Bowls Club who are the primary users of the indoor bowls hall have struggled to increase membership since the new Arena was built despite best efforts, the support of Lex Leisure and the Council's Sports Development Officer. They face the challenge of declining numbers, a largely aging demographic and an inability to break even.
- 3.2. Indoor bowls appeals to a relatively small demographic with only a small number of members (around 170) benefiting from the space. This leaves the

hall sitting empty for large parts of the year, unlike the sports hall that enables a vast array of clubs and users to benefit from the space for a multitude of uses.

- 3.3. As well as supporting the return of a greater number of leisure users, it should be noted that bowls income generated from casual play, equipment hire and memberships prior to Coronavirus generated £25k of income/annum compared to £70k generated by the sports hall.
- 3.4. During national Coronavirus restrictions throughout 2020/21, the bowls hall was temporarily re-purposed to enable socially distanced group exercise and the Rushcliffe Indoor Bowls Club placed itself into hibernation. Group exercise is key to gym membership retention and with memberships forming the bulk of the operator's income protecting memberships was, and remains, essential to reducing the impact of Coronavirus and supporting the overall recovery of the Arena leisure centre.
- 3.5. A basic conversion, essentially changing the floor covering of the existing bowls rinks along with some cosmetic improvements of the space allows the use of the facility for other sports uses, mitigating loss of memberships and appealing to a wider demographic whilst offering an attractive payback period compared to a more substantial conversion involving the removal of the bowling gullies, perimeter wall and installing lighting and audio systems. A simple conversion at the outset enables the success of the new space to be reviewed whilst providing comfort that it could be reverted should that ever be required.
- 3.6. A potential larger scale conversion of the space would form part of a further report once the overall recovery of the leisure industry and its future is better understood.
- 3.7. Whilst recognising the adverse effect on the Bowls Club by converting the area to a more multi use facility, such a conversion would support the wider return of users and would be in line with the Council's current Leisure Facilities Strategy vision "to provide high quality, financially sustainable leisure facilities to support Rushcliffe residents to enjoy healthy active lives" (RBC, Leisure Facilities Strategy, 2017).
- 3.8. In line with our leisure strategy, when changing a facility's primary use it is important to note that Sports England would support such changes based on the Council's desire to enhance the facility by "supporting improvement to existing sport and physical activity provision where they are needed" and "encouraging and securing wider community use of new and existing sport and physical activity provision" (Sports England, Planning for Sport Guidance, 2019).

#### **4. Supporting Information**

- 4.1. The Rushcliffe Indoor Bowls Club have played at Rushcliffe Arena for many years since the early 1990s when membership was over 1,000 members. The old Arena, on the same site, housed an eight rink bowls facility with bar and lounge. This was reduced to six rinks with no bar/lounge at the new Arena

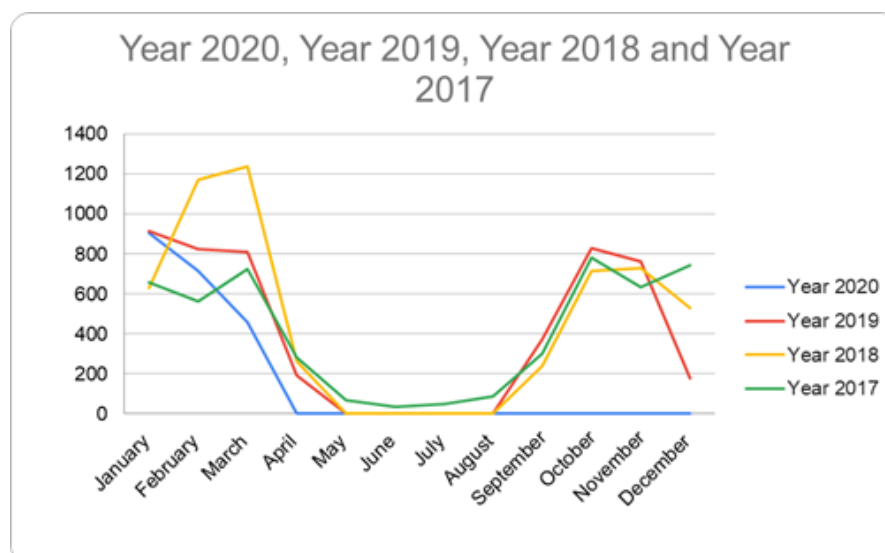
when it opened in January 2017. This reduction was a recognition at the time that the Club membership was declining and the sport becoming less popular.

- 4.2. Rushcliffe Arena is one of four indoor bowls facilities locally. The nearest alternative venues are Richard Herrod Centre in Carlton (six rinks), Nottingham Indoor Bowls Centre at Beechdale (eight rinks), and Erewash Indoor Bowls Centre in Long Eaton (nine rinks). Further afield, there is a six rink facility in the Llamas Centre in Sutton in Ashfield and an eight rink facility at Newark Showground.
- 4.3. In addition to 4.2 above, further indoor bowls facilities are also available for use in Melton Mowbray and Loughborough, and many of these alternative facilities are within a 30 minute driving time from Rushcliffe which is considered a reasonable travel distance by the sport's governing body (English Indoor Bowls Association).
- 4.4. Lex Leisure provide extensive support to Rushcliffe Indoor Bowls Club unlike other clubs who merely hire the venue but manage all their own finance, governance and safeguarding policies. In addition, the Council has provided on-going support, marketing and investment in attempting to encourage and increase usage.
- 4.5. The Club has struggled to increase membership since returning to the new Arena despite the significant support of Lex Leisure and the Council's Sport's Development Officer, dropping from 377 members in 2009 to 285 prior to the old Arena closing in 2015, and peaking at 169 for the most recent 2019/20 season.
- 4.6. The bowls hall sits empty for large periods with only 4,889 visits in the year before Coronavirus closed centres intermittently, compared to 21,515 sporting activities in the sports hall and 40,301 exercise class attendees. This is because other sports and events cannot take place in the hall without it being boarded out. This is not a quick logistical exercise, so the outcome is that during the bowls season the hall is not used for other purposes.
- 4.7. In March 2020, Rushcliffe Arena closed as the entire country entered national lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. When indoor group exercise could resume in July 2020, the decision was taken by Rushcliffe Borough Council and Lex Leisure to postpone the indoor bowls season from September 2020 to April 2021. The bowls rinks were boarded over and utilised for socially distanced group exercise. Group exercise is key to membership retention with memberships forming the bulk of the operator's income (51%, followed by swimming at 34% and bowls income being just 0.5%). Protecting memberships was, and remains, essential in the industry's recovery.
- 4.8. Table 1.1 and graphic 1.2 demonstrates the low use of the indoor bowls facility and how it can sit empty for large parts of the year during the outdoor bowls season.

Table 1.1 Indoor Bowls Hall Usage Data

	Year 2020	Year 2019	Year 2018	Year 2017
January	907	914	628	657
February	716	825	1173	563
March	458	812	1237	725
April	0	192	262	282
May	0	0	0	70
June	0	0	0	38
July	0	0	0	51
August	0	0	0	90
September	0	374	241	302
October	0	831	714	784
November	0	762	728	636
December	0	179	531	744
Total	2081	4889	5514	4942

Graphic 1.2. Month on Month Indoor Bowls Hall Usage Data



- 4.9. Officers have met with committee members of the Indoor Bowls Club to discuss their current standing and how the closure of the indoor bowls facility would impact the Club and their members. Officers have also met with a representative of English Indoor Bowls Association.
- 4.10. There is a strong feeling, expressed by the Club Committee itself, that the Club would be unable to continue at another venue and would likely cease. Members would, and already have, joined other local clubs and leagues at other venues, stopped playing or partake in outdoor bowls only. That said, there was an understanding by the Committee as to why a large space was untenable to retain from a strategic perspective as a facility for such a small number of people when it could be serving a wider demographic and an acceptance that Coronavirus has had a negative impact on their memberships with members

being nervous of being in indoor spaces or having fallen out of the habit of indoor bowling.

- 4.11. In discussions with the Club Committee, the Council committed to carry out a survey of the current membership to better understand how we could assist the Club, and any members keen to continue bowling. Early indications from the survey are detailed below.
- 4.12. 54 responses were received which accounts for 32% of the total membership. Of these responses, 50% indicated that during the pandemic they had taken part in alternative exercise whereas 50% had not. 58% indicated they were now confident in returning to leisure centres whereby 42% indicated they were either relatively confident (30%) or not confident at all (12%).
- 4.13. 30% confirmed they had either visited or joined another indoor bowls facility whereas 70% had not; and 30% confirmed they would be interested in attending some form of indoor short mat bowling whilst 70% did not.
- 4.14. 25% also confirmed they would be interested in some form of support from Rushcliffe to help in joining another club with financial support for membership and help in travel mentioned whereas 75% indicated they did not require any assistance.
- 4.15. Whilst there has been a reluctant acceptance of the current situation by the Committee members, some users have been vocal in their resistance to change supported by letters, survey comments and the issue being raised by the local Member of Parliament.
- 4.16. It is, however, recognised that supporting the remaining members and mitigating the loss of the facility is essential and officers will continue to explore all options including supporting any current members who may wish to switch clubs or offer alternative options in the re-purposed hall including short mat bowling, in line with the results of the survey outlined above.

## **5. Alternative options considered and reasons for rejection**

5.1. Several options were considered and are outlined fully below:

5.1.1 **Resume indoor bowls season in September 2021.** This option is not supported. Continued social distancing restrictions and nervousness of return to play is likely to result in even lower levels of use than 2020. Not being able to use the space for group exercise risks loss of membership, predicted to be around £390k impact/year if group exercise cannot be offered.

5.1.2 **Postpone indoor bowls for a further season and continue as now with a temporary floor.** This option is not supported. The boarded flooring currently in use is stored in a shipping container in the Arena staff car park area. It takes around three days of staff time to lay plastic sheeting to protect the bowls carpet and then lay the heavy-duty tongue

and grove chip board flooring over. The wooden surface is not impervious or cleansable. Whilst acceptable for short term use, it is not fit for long-term sporting use (aesthetically poor, not capable of cleaning, trip hazards where damaged at joints).

**5.1.3 Change use of the indoor bowls hall to group exercise and events (sporting and non-sporting) with a simple conversion.** This is the preferred option. A £60k investment will replace the existing bowls floor covering with a more suitable cleansable fitness standard flooring. Use of the space will mitigate membership loss and generate a predicted £63k/yr in increased income. Conversion work can be carried out quickly and will provide a safer more aesthetically pleasing space. The space could still be utilised for elections and non-sporting events or be converted back to bowls in the future. Whilst this option does retain wasted space around the old bowls rinks and only enables the space to be used for one activity at a time, it offers the most cost-effective quick resolution.

**5.1.4 Change the use to a top class dedicated exercise studio facility with collapsible walls to create various space combinations and high-tech audio-visual functionality.** This option is not currently supported. This option, whilst creating a unique selling point and a market leading facility for group exercise and other activities, requires a significant £500k investment to achieve with a predicted 4.5yr payback. This option would require a recently installed laser levelled floor beneath the bowl's green to be stripped out and would require significant building works and downtime to the space during the conversion. It is felt prudent to assess the success of a non-bowls environment as per 5.1.3 above first, before making such a significant capital investment of this nature which would form part of a further report to be considered by Cabinet.

## **6. Risks and Uncertainties**

- 6.1. A key risk is the impact on the Indoor Bowls Club and its members. The Club is unlikely to be able to transfer to another venue and to survive the closure of the indoor bowls facility. Displaced members may stop taking part in physical activity and lack of social contact for displaced bowlers may lead to isolation and loneliness. It may be an option for the Council to offer a goodwill payment of subscriptions to another local club for 12 months for members wishing to carry on elsewhere. In any case, if the bowls hall is repurposed, the Council will work closely with our leisure provider to ensure displaced members have access to alternative forms of exercise and social activity so as to minimise the risk of loss of fitness and social isolation in this group. For example, short mat bowls, boccia, indoor walking cricket/football and lower impact group exercise classes.
- 6.2. Predicted income generation is not materialised. It is predicted that memberships are key to the recovery of the leisure industry from Coronavirus and the success of memberships is directly linked to the ability to take part in group exercise classes. See previous footnote to the options table. A multi-use

space also allows the venue to be hired for other uses ensuring the space is fully utilised, unlike an indoor bowls facility that sits empty for large periods.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1. Financial Implications**

7.1.1. The preferred option represents a £60k investment that needs to be accommodated within the Council's MTFs. This could be accommodated from the £15k provision in the 2021/22 Capital Programme for replacement bowls hall furniture and the remainder from a sum of £75k currently allocated to repair of the Arena reception floor area, also currently in the 2021/22 Capital Programme which is not expected to be fully utilised.

7.1.2 Discussions are ongoing with Parkwood to ensure that the contractual agreement reflects a commensurate financial return.

7.1.3 In 2020/21, the Council provided financial support to the operator at a net cost of £1m due to Coronavirus closures. The extension of the contract approved by Cabinet in January 2021, includes the new leisure centre being built in Bingham. It is anticipated that the Council will receive an income from August 2021, resuming the pre-Covid positive position.

7.1.4 Coronavirus has had a significant detrimental impact on the leisure industry and subsequently on the potential returns from the leisure contract. If the operator is unable to retain memberships through lack of group exercise offering or is unable to generate income from the maximisation of the asset, they are likely to seek a review of the contract management fee or look to the local authority to support their losses in other ways.

### **7.2. Legal Implications**

The Council has a contract with the leisure operator, the specification of which references the facilities at Rushcliffe Arena including an indoor bowls hall. Some amendments would need to be made to that contract to reflect any change to the use of this space.

### **7.3. Equalities Implications**

7.3.1 The Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix) concluded no adverse impact by the repurposing of the bowls hall and that it would have a positive impact on many groups by providing additional provision by becoming a multi-functional space.

7.3.2 78% of group exercise users are female. It is likely a loss in the ability to offer group exercise would have a greater negative impact on female membership than male membership (Lex Leisure).

7.3.3 52% of Millennials prefer group exercise with others to tap into the social benefits of the 'group effect' (Lex Leisure).

#### 7.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

None identified

### 8. Link to Corporate Priorities

Quality of Life	The delivery of a high quality and good value for money leisure services offer is a key foundation of supporting our residents to maintain their quality of life and implement the Rushcliffe Borough Council Leisure Facilities Strategy.
Efficient Services	Maximising utilisation of leisure space and assets is key to the recovery of the leisure industry following the uncertain year presented by coronavirus.
Sustainable Growth	Enabling the use of the space for multiple uses allows a greater demographic of users to benefit from the activities on offer and ensure the leisure operator remains viable and proactive in the delivery of leisure services for the Borough.
The Environment	Increasing the utilisation of this space enhances energy efficiency, which in turn will support actions captured within Carbon Management Plan and Rushcliffe's commitment to become Carbon Neutral by 2030.

### 9. Recommendation

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<b>For more information contact:</b>	David Banks Director Neighbourhoods 0115 914 8438 <a href="mailto:dbanks@rushcliffe.gov.uk">dbanks@rushcliffe.gov.uk</a>
<b>Background papers available for Inspection:</b>	
<b>List of appendices:</b>	Equality Impact Assessment Arena Facilities Review