

## **Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council**

Thank you Mark Ladbroke, Catriona Hobbs, Diana Volpe, Jamie Clarke and Councillor Jarvis for your addresses and for raising your concerns about the recommendations to award the leisure management contract to Serco Leisure.

The Cabinet has also received similar representations from Caroline Raine, Liz Peretz, and Oxford District Trade Unions Council.

I will respond to the overall representations that you and the others have made to Cabinet. Officers will also prepare written answers to the detailed questions which were circulated more widely and to Councillors.

We are today considering the officers' recommendation to appoint Serco Leisure as the preferred leisure operator.

Nationally, several Councils have declared that they are unable to balance their budgets, where many are reducing their leisure provision, and in some cases closing leisure centres. The Council is keen to ensure that our leisure offer is one that is sustainable in the longer term, provides much improved services, looks to strongly align with health priorities, whilst also being accessible and affordable to our diverse communities in the City.

Following a transparent and competitive process which has fully complied with procurement policies and legal requirements, Serco Leisure has presented a bid that matches the priorities of the Council whilst also driving investment and improving quality within our facilities - including providing brand new gym equipment and improvements - whilst also enabling them to be sustainable over the longer term.

Serco Leisure is one of the country's leading leisure operators and is the current UK Pool and Spa water Leisure Operator of the year. It also manages Stoke Mandeville Stadium (the birthplace of the Paralympic movement), national sports centres such as Bisham Abbey and Lilleshall, alongside many local authority centres including Birmingham, a City of Sanctuary and has recently been awarded Buckinghamshire.

Serco Leisure's proposal includes secure several public benefits, including concessions for low-income families, free swimming for all children and young people aged 16 and under who live in Oxford, and secure £2.75m investment in upgrading our centres. The contract would see the Council working with Serco Leisure alongside the Oxfordshire health system to ensure the leisure facilities continue to support public health and reduce pressure on the NHS. There will also be a funding pot where we can better target communities in need to help break down any barriers to access.

The appointment of the leisure operator is a legal process which follows procurement law and is not open to political intervention. Serco Leisure's tender scored best against The Council's criteria which included both qualitative and financial elements, and which we are legally required to accept.

The Council can only consider the behaviour and performance of Serco Leisure Ltd as the bidding company in its assessment of the bid. We cannot consider issues raised relating to other companies in deciding the procurement outcome.

If Cabinet approves the recommendation, one of the next key steps will be to talk to Serco Leisure in early February about any key details, including actions to be put in place and the right contractual arrangements for ensuring that they deliver their commitments, and to secure the smooth transfer of services from Fusion at the end of March.

We remain committed to Oxford being a place where everyone feels welcome, and to our work in supporting refugees and asylum seekers and celebrating the contribution they make to our communities.