



# FRIENDS OF THE STRAND POOL

## COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Monday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2016 7.00pm at Hastings Arms, 18 Lower Rainham Road, Gillingham ME7 2YD

Attendance: Peter Wright, Jackie Wright, Victoria Hill, Cllr. Pat Cooper, Adrian Sambrook, Graham Bourne, Jane Bourne, Barbara Monaghan

Apologies: Jo Matthews, Sally Smith, Alan Blyth, Heather Morgan, Patrick Nolan, Cllr. Andy Stamp, Cllr. Adam Price

### 1.0 WELCOME

Victoria Hill welcomed Barbara to the Committee. Informal introductions were given by all attending, and thanks given to Debbie of the Hastings Arms for providing the room at no cost.

### 2.0 CURRENT SITUATION

VH led a comprehensive discussion on progress made and new issues that had come to light. Essentially, FOSP was established to dissuade Medway Council of their plan to slash opening hours at the Pool, but despite correspondence, meetings, a press campaign and a huge petition, to date these had not actually changed.

Medway Sports, Leisure and Tourism (SL&T) have not responded formally to a FOSP request that 'core hours' at least be amended from 11.00 to 5.00, to 1.00 to 7.00, in order to allow people to swim after work. PW advised that a verbal response from Bob Dimond had been to the effect that 'people are coming in at 11.00, we don't want to turn them away'. And FOSP had not settled on any morning 'hire periods' of the Pool, being unsure at present where the demand really lies.

But new and totally unexpected challenges had arisen, with the Pool not being ready for the start of the season, staff not knowing how to operate the filtration system, the Pool bottom being dirty and potentially dangerous, the water being at times filthy and unacceptable, leading to members of the public demanding refunds, damaged steps (since repaired) and even allegations of blisters being caused by 'chemicals in the Pool'. Added to a complete lack of predictability of the opening hours, and staff turning away customers towards the end of the day, the Pool is likely to be enduring one of the worst seasons ever experienced. Official Pool attendance figures remain oblique, with no reliable method of measuring visitor numbers, or ensuring that cash taken is actually banked and accounted for as no receipts are provided.

Members also noted the frequent lack of other Strand facilities, including the bouncy castle and the ever-popular train, and voiced a real concern that the Strand Park and Pool were being deliberately run down by the Council.

However, Cllr. Pat Cooper shared some, as yet confidential, information relating to a recent funding bid made by Medway Council that, she hoped, would bring significant investment to the North Gillingham area. Details remain patchy at present but more will be known in the next few months.

Members expressed some hope that management at the Pool has been strengthened by Julie, usually Manager at Hoo Pool, being drafted in to the Strand for the balance of this season. She has a lot to learn about the practicalities of the river water system but seems keen and has made a positive impact. Jane warned however that some promised activity (e.g. a backwash operation) had not taken place, as promised.

A wide-ranging discussion on the correct use of the water filtration system ensued, with heavy criticism of the Pool staff - some really had no idea about how the system is supposed to work, and others were reluctant to share what knowledge they had, or work at weekends when some specialised tasks need to be carried out.

Members had seen for themselves that tap water is being used to top up the Pool, despite a categorical assurance that this was not the case. A pool vacuum had been found, and seems to work quite well, despite assertions that the machine had failed 'due to being immersed in salt water'.

Jet skiers had brought to the Pool managements' attention that a large bore pipe outside the Pool was constantly running water onto Commodores' Hard. This would appear to be an overflow and should not be permanently losing water?

Members had been advised that, during the period of very hot weather and dirty water, the suggestion had been to carry out a massive chloride clean that would have required the Pool to be closed for 3 to 4 days. Fortunately, this had been averted with correct use of the filtration system and further volunteer cleaning from FOSP.

But all present were aware of customers demanding refunds and leaving the Pool very disappointed during this difficult period. PW questioned FOSP's role in trying to manage these situations – we are not responsible for the running of the Pool but we do have a great interest in it?

It was agreed that the excellent Notice explaining the source and quality of the Pool water that Jane and Graham had put up on the noticeboard should be more widely circulated via Facebook and Twitter, to bring it to greater attention. Also that a Daily Mail story about 'hot weather blisters' be published.

**Action: 2.1 PW to communicate Notice via social media**

**Action: 2.2 FOSP to request follow up meeting with SL&T, preferably with Bob Dimond at the Pool with Julie – PW to request and organise**

Jane advised that Sally Smith has written to Rehman Chisti complaining about the situation, but did not know the content, only that Sally has asked for Tracey Crouch to be made aware in her role as Minister for Sport.

**Action: 2.3 Could Sally share her correspondence with Victoria please**

Sam advised that Stonehaven Pool in Scotland had established a good partnership with their local Council, and that many other Lidos had experienced the same battle. The people at Portishead Lido were even willing to come and meet with us and discuss with Medway Council how they had made their pool successful. VH confirmed that Brockwell Lido would also help if necessary.

### **3.0 PUBLICITY, PRESS and COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE**

PW said that the KM Group continue to provide supportive coverage, keeping the story alive and encouraging visitors, but they also had to report the complaints mentioned above.

**Action 3.1: PW to contact Jade at KM and update her on Pool condition and Daily Mail 'blisters' story**

VH confirmed that the BBC TV piece didn't happen but that there was still a chance for it to be raised again in the future.

PW briefly outlined FOSP Facebook results – 3,809 people reached in past 28 days, regular posts being read by 300 to 400 people typically, when boosted, this has reached over 1,300. Numbers are still growing and at the moment this and Twitter are our only communication mediums.

#### **4.0 PETITION NEXT STEPS**

VH and some other members had attended the full Council Meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> July and the full petition of over 5,500 signatures was formally presented.

Cllr. Pat Cooper explained the process that would now be followed. As the FOSP petition had attracted a good volume of supporters, it was likely to be discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 18<sup>th</sup> August (6.30 at Gun Wharf), where the committee would review the response of the appropriate Council department and any recommendations made, i.e. to agree to act as requested, to take an alternative course, or possibly reject and do nothing.

The Council's Democratic Services people would contact VH as the lead petitioner prior to the meeting.

Members expressed their concern that there is a risk that no action will be taken – the season will be virtually over by the 18<sup>th</sup> August, and SL&T had not shifted materially from their initial stance. After discussion, it was agreed that more pressure be brought to bear upon the ruling Conservative Councillors, requesting their full support for the aims of FOSP and the petition signatories. Specifically, that 2017 hours be discussed and agreed with users and Councillors, and that sufficient funding was allocated in the 2017 Budget to support these hours.

**Action: 4.1: PW to write to Cllr. Howard Doe requesting his support for the petition hearing on 18<sup>th</sup> August**

#### **5.0 ACTION PLAN**

Members recognised that FOSP objectives had quickly changed from being mainly focused on extending the opening hours to their concerns with the daily management of the Pool.

VH suggested that, in the long term, FOSP could consider taking on greater responsibility, to the extent of forming a CIC and managing the Pool completely. PW agreed that, run with vision and enthusiasm, a profit could be made and the Pool would again be an asset rather than a liability for Medway Council. But members realised that this was a step that is outside their present capabilities.

Priorities for the closed season were therefore agreed at getting the Pool drained, cleaned, painted and re-opened in great condition next Spring, to maximise the impact of the petition meeting, to continue with the communication strategy via website and social media, and to seek funding to enable FOSP to purchase required items of kit and to pay for admin and web costs.

Cllr. Cooper recommended an approach to ASDA for a community project might be worthwhile, with MEMS, Kings Ferry, Rainham Coaches and others suggested as possible sponsors.

**Action 5.1: Committee members to give some thought to fund raising via sponsors and particularly what FOSP can offer potential supporters in return? To be actioned at our next meeting.**

#### **6.0 WEBSITE**

Pat Nolan had tentatively been suggested as a potential website builder at a previous meeting. PW agreed to contact him and check if this is a possibility. Sam may have a potential alternative or we can get on and build a site ourselves, but this is an important next step

**Action 6.1: PW to contact Pat Nolan to check if able to set up website**

#### **7.0 MEMBERSHIP**

Committee members remain uncertain as to a suitable structure for FOSP membership. What benefits would members receive? Could merchandise be produced and sold. Could large posters or banners be produced to promote FOSP? And badges or car stickers?

It was agreed that FOSP would continue to build a database of supporters and not look to make any formal membership fee for now, with a view to building a useful contact list first, that could be ported into 'membership' as FOSP develops.

Promotional events were discussed, with a sponsored 'Channel Swim' (22 miles of relays) and possibly an end of season party at the Pool considered viable.

A further clean-up day was agreed to be held on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August, from 9.00.

**Action: Jackie to advise Julie at Pool that FOSP volunteers will be in that day**

## **8.0 OTHER BUSINESS**

The Strand Café was raised as a potential ally with FOSP, though formal links had not been made. We agreed to work more closely with the franchisees there.

**Action: Cllr. Pat Cooper agreed to speak to the Café people and align their ideas with ours**

**Meeting closed at 9.20 pm.**