

SE21. Following the Public Pound – Falkirk Community Trust

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided the Committee with an update of the performance of Falkirk Community Trust (the Trust) in line with Following the Public Pound guidance. The report covered the performance of the Trust between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019 and also provided an update on the period April -June 2019.

Neil Brown gave a detailed overview of the highlights of the Trust's performance as set out in the Annual Report. He stated that financial support from the Council had decreased and that income had grown, with the Trust continuing to reduce its financial dependency on the Council (from 72% of its funding to 57%). He highlighted:

- increased customer income
- increased customer admission
- external funding of £1m
- the change in membership of the Board, with inductions carried out for new members
- the first professional pantomime, held in Falkirk Town Hall and its success
- the refurbishment of level 1 of the Marnier Centre creating the first immersive fitness studio
- the creation of Carron Gymnastic Centre
- improvements to Bo'ness Recreation Centre

He also stated that there was an ongoing deterioration of facilities and highlighted the ongoing financial challenges which the Trust faced. He cited recent failures at Hallglen Sports Centre which he advised had been expected by the Trust for a number of years. Going forward, Mr Brown stated that the 50% reduction in funding by the Council would present a challenge to the Trust and stated that the forthcoming business strategy would aim to increase income rather than reduce staff numbers.

The convener thanked Mr Brown for his overview of the Trust's performance and concurred that the Trust faced challenges going forward. In response to a question in regard to measuring attendance at the Helix Mr Brown stated that there was consistent methodology employed to allow year on year comparison.

In response to a question in regard to the popularity of the Kelpies, Mr Brown stated that this was a weather dependent attraction. It was a popular attraction for tour visits. The Helix was used by the local community for walks etc.

The committee noted that neither the Helix nor Callendar House charged admission and as such did not generate income for the Trust. Mr Brown stated that charging had been considered by the Trust recently. The Helix had not been designed to be a chargeable attraction. The visitor centre boosted income. There was a balance to be struck.

Following a statement by a member that at a recent visit to Callendar House there had been a lack of staff serving afternoon teas, Mr Brown stated that he was aware that at that time staff had been off sick and conceded that he would need to look at resilience to avoid a repeat.

In regard to the pantomime Mr Brown responded to a statement that some Falkirk schools had attended a show in Dunfermline rather than go to the Falkirk show by stating that it was disappointing but was a sign that the shows were full. All seats for Falkirk schools had been taken.

The committee discussed and praised the fireworks event. Mr Brown agreed that it was a spectacular event and praised the volunteers who collected donations from the public. Because of charity regulations the volunteers could hold but not shake collection buckets. If everyone who attended gave £1 the event would break even.

Returning to the pantomime the committee recalled Mr Brown's assertion that it had been a success and asked if it had broken even. Mr Brown said it had made a loss of £20k but that this had been projected. This had been the first year in which a professional pantomime had been staged and was a year of transition. The aim had been to grow the project. The Trust had knowledge based on its experience – that schools will attend, that people will book early and pay more for better seats. The target had been 50% capacity in the first year. Which 60% had been reached this was satisfactory and the target had been optimistic for a first year. Mr Brown, following a question, undertook to provide details on targets for 2019 shows.

The committee then discussed Bo'ness Recreation Centre. Members highlighted instances when visitors had called the centre to book classes and been told to try elsewhere. Mr Brown stated that following the Council meeting in June when it had considered proposals for Trust facilities there had been rumour mongering in communities and these had hit Bo'ness in particular. It was a major concern for the Trust – the rumours that the centre was closing had hit business. The Trust, he stated, was not deliberately running down the Centre. It was put to Mr Brown that there was a proposal for the centre in the report to Council and it was a consequence of this that business, who advertised in the centre, would not want to spend money here given it was written 'in black and white'. It was not 'black and white' in the Trust's view according to Mr Brown. The Council had stated that there had to be a rationalisation of its assets and there were options to provide alternative facilities. This was a matter for the Council Mr Brown stated. He undertook to provide an answer to the question in regard to calls to the centre. Members highlighted further similar instances. Members also highlighted an issue with floodlights at the Centre which had not been working. Mr Brown stated that the failure had been reported to the Council, which was responsible, but it had taken the Council 18 months to fix the problem.

Members then questioned the programme at the Bo'ness Hippodrome. It did not cater to local tastes, it was suggested. Furthermore a survey of preferred types of films for presenting had been carried out by the Trust but to date there had been no feedback from the Trust on how the outcomes would be

taken forward. Mr Brown stated that the programme was varied and included both popular moves and more specialist niche movies. He would provide information on the survey results. He stated that the programme had been revamped and that the mix catered for a variety of tastes.

Members highlighted an issue with the sauna at the Centre. Again, Mr Brown stated that the Council had been responsible for the repair under the terms of the working agreement with the Trust. The delay illustrated he stated that the Trust was not on the Council's list of properties. Members stated that the problems with the facilities and the choice of films at the Hippodrome impacted on the Trusts ability to generate income.

The committee praised the work of Friends of Kinneil which had seen an increase in visitor numbers at Kinneil House.

The committee returned to the issues at Bo'ness Recreation Centre and the time taken to rectify the problems. The committee suggested that this was a Bo'ness issue and confirmed to the community that services were being run down. Mr Brown responded that he could cite more issues across the wider area – it was not particular to Bo'ness. He cited in particular Hallglen Sports Centre, and said 'repairs' was a consistent issue across the estate, not specific to Bo'ness.

The committee turned to the performance of the Trust noting an increase year on year in the number of accidents involving staff and customers (367 in 2017/18). Mr Brown stated that every instance was recorded. He listed several factors, such as the increase in foot fall at the Mariner soft play facility and the fact that the figure included minor accidents including bumps and grazes.

The committee then discussed patronage of Callendar Park Golf Course. Mr Brown stated that this was open for half the year and the course was not maintained when the course was not used. It needed daily treatment all year round. However the grounds maintenance staff were utilised at Grangemouth Golf Course which was open all year. Nonetheless the number of times the course was played had increased. The committee asked whether, in that case, more funding could be allocated to the course maintenance. Mr Brown stated that it was a business decision, funding was not available and it would not be appropriate to move staff from an income generating facility to one which was closed.

Following a question Mr Brown confirmed that the work on a changing places facility would begin within the week and there would be disruption during the 8 week programme.

The convener returned to Mr Brown's earlier comments that the Trust faced a 50% reduction in funding from the Council. Mr Brown stated that this was over 5 years and not in 2020/21.

The committee asked whether income from the Bo'ness Hill Climb would be spent on Bo'ness estate. Mr Brown stated that he was unable to recall the

fee charged to the organisers but it would not go back to the estate. Income would go back to the Trust.

Decision

The Committee approved the report and acknowledge progress by the Trust in meeting Council priorities.