

# FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Council supports leisure centre operator through coronavirus emergency**

The charitable trust managing Fenland's four leisure centres is set to receive a financial lifeline from Fenland District Council to help support it through the coronavirus emergency.

The Council has agreed an urgent financial relief package with not-for-profit trust Freedom Leisure, which operates the district's leisure centres in Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech.

Like many businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and immediate impact on Freedom Leisure and the leisure industry as a whole. With the Government's forced closure of leisure facilities, income levels have ceased while significant costs continue to be incurred.

Freedom Leisure has now sought urgent financial support from its partners, including Fenland District Council and 22 other local government authorities, to help meet ongoing costs through the crisis and to ensure it can fulfil contractual obligations to manage leisure facilities on their behalf once the outbreak is over.

The financial package agreed includes a loan to help meet costs and protect the services that people value, plus funding to cover staff keeping the leisure centres safe, secure and functional so that they are ready to re-open as soon as possible when restrictions are lifted.

Leader of Fenland District Council, Cllr Chris Boden, said: "These are unprecedented times which have required us to take a flexible approach to working with our partners, with a view to achieving a return to business as usual in the future.

"We must do everything we can to protect our leisure centres and the sustainability of our contract with Freedom. We are only just into the second year of a 15 year contract that has already seen considerable investment by Freedom into the leisure centres. It also saves the Council around £500,000 a year, equating to around £5.6m of savings over the remaining 14 years of the contract.

"Our financial forecasts show that the Council faces a continuing budget gap, with the need to find over £1million in savings by 2024/25 exclusive of our additional COVID-19 related costs and future funding uncertainties. If the Freedom contract ended and we took over the management of the leisure centres once again this would add significant additional cost to the Council."

Cllr Sam Clark, the Council's Portfolio Holder for Leisure, added: "Freedom has already pumped a considerable amount of much-needed investment into our leisure centres since they took over their management and operation in December 2018, including the redevelopment of the Hudson in Wisbech and new state-of-the-art equipment across all four centres.

"Helping Freedom to meet their ongoing costs throughout this crisis will help protect our valued leisure centres and ensure that existing leisure centre memberships are protected and honoured so that users will be unaffected once the facilities can safely reopen."

In the meantime, the Council continues to lobby the Government for further financial aid to cover its COVID-19 related costs. The Government has already provided funding of almost £1.1million towards the costs, although further funding has yet to be announced.

Ivan Horsfall Turner, Freedom Leisure's Managing Director, said: "We are grateful for the support we are getting from Fenland District Council and fully appreciate and share their aspiration to reopen centres and enable customers and members to access their local leisure centres once more. We want to reinstate the service as soon as we are able to and financial support from the Council will be crucial in allowing us to do that. That said, the measures that are likely to be put in place by the Government with regard to social distancing and hygiene, as well as the level of customer demand, is very likely to have an impact on the service we can provide for some months to come."

**ENDS**

**For more information contact Fenland District Council press office on 01354 622226**