

Dear Colleagues,

Stour Centre to close ahead of major refurbishment; Freedom Leisure takes over running our main leisure facilities

Subject to Full Council approval on 16 July, the Stour Centre Leisure Centre in Ashford is set to close ahead of a major refurbishment programme which will transform the way leisure facilities are provided in the area to meet the needs of Ashford's growing population.

The £6.5m investment will transform in the way they are provided, boosting participation and improving the health and wellbeing of residents. The changes include refurbishment of the gym and a new soft play and clip and climb centre at the Stour Centre and a new fitness suite at the Julie Rose Stadium, while both reception areas and the catering offer will be improved with the introduction of Costa Coffee.

As the borough continues to grow, we feel passionately that our leisure offer must evolve to meet demand and ensure Ashford remains active. By closing the centre, the works will be finished sooner and will greatly enhance the leisure offer when they are completed.

Sadly the closure does mean redundancies for Ashford Leisure Trust staff, which is very unfortunate. We will be working with ALT to contact those regular user groups to support them find alternative facilities. While the works to the Stour Centre take place, the Julie Rose Stadium will be expanding its activities and gym facilities.

If approved, the centre will close for around a year, with the anticipated reopening date around mid-2021. It was felt that with the ongoing uncertainty on demand in the short term and the additional social distancing measures as that are likely to be required a result of Covid-19 during the construction, closing the centre is the best option.

Without closing the centre the works were expected to take around nine months longer, with the new improved facilities not being available until March 2022.

Freedom Leisure takes over the day-to-day running of our main leisure facilities including the Stour Centre, Julie Rose Stadium and other council owned leisure sites from 1 September. Freedom Leisure is a not-for-profit leisure trust which manages leisure and cultural facilities on behalf of partners across the UK, including two centres in Maidstone and Sandwich.

They take over the reins from Ashford Leisure Trust and will be working in partnership with us to oversee investment in leisure facilities and a transformation in the way they are provided, boosting participation and improving the health and wellbeing of residents.

Last year ABC and Ashford Leisure Trust (ALT) started the search for a new leisure operator to transform the way leisure facilities are provided in the area to meet the needs of Ashford's growing population. As part of the new arrangements ALT will step back from the management of the operation of the Stour Centre, Julie Rose Stadium and other leisure sites, allowing the council to enter into a contract directly with Freedom Leisure.

ALT will focus on fulfilling its charitable objectives of improving the health and wellbeing of local residents, with a focus on those who are in disadvantaged groups or with health challenges. Freedom Leisure will manage the running of the Stour Centre, Julie Rose Stadium, Conningbrook Lakes, Spearpoint Recreation Ground pavilion, football pitches and tennis courts. The new lease is for 15 years with an option to extend the contract by a further five years.

Specialist team appointed to take Vicarage Lane project forward

We have appointed specialist developer, Milligan, to help deliver our ambitious Vicarage Lane town centre redevelopment project. The new team also includes MICA (architect) and AECOM (project manager).

As colleagues are aware, the scheme, which includes the former Mecca bingo hall in the Lower High Street, is a proposed mixed use development, aiming to deliver quality homes, cultural and performance space, food and drink outlets and workspace to complement the town's history and heritage.

Our proposals include the part demolition of the rear of the former bingo hall to reveal an uninterrupted view to the Grade I listed St Mary's Church, while retaining the high street frontage of the building to create a multi-use indoor event space.

In appointing the consultants, we were looking for stand-out performers who are passionate about using the Vicarage Lane scheme as a catalyst for town centre regeneration. We believe this scheme will help rejuvenate Ashford, enhance our cultural offer, create significant job opportunities and attract inward investment for the benefit of local communities.



High Streets were facing challenging times even before the Coronavirus pandemic sent our town centres into lockdown. As we emerge from lockdown there is an even more compelling need for our High Streets to reinvent themselves and what they offer. We are committed to revitalising Ashford's town centre and we are confident that this specialist team will help us take this exciting scheme forward.

Business & Planning Bill 2020

We want to inform colleagues that the newly-published Business & Planning Bill proposes significant changes designed to help licensed premises. The provisions include:

Alcohol licensing changes that will allow existing alcohol on-sales licensees to make off-sales and to make deliveries. This change is not considered to present any significant issues or resource burden on the council. Details of the amendments will be published online and directly to the relevant premises, which equates to 55 of the 430 council-licensed premises.

A new "Pavement Licence" regime, designed to make it easier for premises serving food and drink to seat and serve customers outdoors. This has a more immediate resource impact and is summarised below. Once the scheme is enacted it will be published online, and advertised through existing communication routes to local businesses.

Under the proposals a food and drink premises would be apply for a 'pavement licence' for the placing of furniture, stalls, tables and chairs on the highway (pavements and pedestrianised areas). The new licence works alongside existing KCC Highways administered tables and chair permits, and therefore businesses may choose to use either regime.

This new regime, which applies only up until 30 September 2021, avoids the time-consuming Highways Act permit process, a possible need for separate street trading licence, and need for planning consent (a grant of this licence constitutes deemed consent). It is also cheaper as fees are capped and will be set at £100 due to the costs involved in administering the regime.

From submitting an online application, businesses will receive a determination on the application within 14 days, with determination made under delegated authority. There is no statutory right of appeal, but it is proposed that any applicant who is aggrieved by the delegated decision may use the existing corporate complaints procedure to have decisions reviewed. The 14 day period also incorporates a seven day public consultation period, where the application will be publicised, and comments invited from Kent Highways, police, ward members, Tenterden Town Council, and Environmental Protection.

Any grant of licence will apply to the end of the scheme where possible, and be subject to conditions. These include mandatory national conditions, published standard conditions (applicable to all premises), and any site specific conditions determined to be necessary. We will continue work with KCC Highways, and as such the standard conditions follow and improve on those already in place for the KCC permits. The proposed conditions will also enable KCC Highways officers and police officers to immediately tackle any urgent issues that they could be presented with in a multi-agency manner.

If breaches of licence occur (i.e. where the furniture is giving rise to H&S risk, or is causing a nuisance) then we may either revoke the licence or serve a notice requiring that steps are taken to remedy the breach. We may also revoke if the applicant failed to install the required site notice or provided false or misleading information in their application.

Discretionary grants scheme pays out

The second batch of discretionary grants payments were made this week to 39 applicants, totalling £344,000. This means we have so far paid out £575,000 to 71 applicants. Officers continue to process and verify the claims before agreeing to make payments.

Stuart is an Ashford Applause winner

Ashford Applause has reached the half way mark, and we are pleased to have showcased five fabulous Ashford Community Champions. The scheme shows our community champions how valued they are by shining a spotlight on special people who make a positive difference to our lives when we need it most.

We are pleased to announce our fifth champion as **Stuart Weller**. Stuart is a local magician and entertainer who has been creating his own weekly YouTube videos to keep families entertained during the lockdown. The videos feature magic tricks, craft ideas and fun activities for children to try at home.

He performed a virtual magic show and raised more than £200 for Child Aid to Eastern Europe (ChildAid). Plus, he has been busy home schooling his children, while his wife Julie has been at work.



To nominate your community champion visit www.ashford.gov.uk/ashfordapplause. For top tips on submitting a great application, visit Loveashford's blog at www.loveashford.com. Applications also accepted by letter, post nominations to Loveashford Team, Economic Development, Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford TN231PL.

Gerry Clarkson CBE, BA (Hons)
Leader – Ashford Borough Council

Tracey Kerly
Chief Executive – Ashford Borough Council

Distribution: All Elected Members of the Authority, KCC Divisional members, CEO, Directors & Heads of Service, Damian Green MP
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