

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday 20 August 2020

## **Finally! Leisure Centres in Mid Sussex will Reopen but Liberal Democrats Voice Concerns About Clair Hall's Future**

**The future of Clair Hall in Haywards Heath was cast into doubt after Conservative councillors voted against proposals to plan for the future of the community hall.**

On Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> August, Liberal Democrats joined other councillors in voting to reopen the District's three leisure centres. The decision was taken at a special meeting of Mid Sussex District Council following weeks of delay.

The deal comes with a high price tag. The Council will forgo its monthly management fee of £120,000 and instead pay an estimated £2.5 million subsidy between now and April 2021 to its leisure contractor Places Leisure, funded from the Council's reserves. A further condition of the proposal is that the Haywards Heath community venue Clair Hall come out of the Places Leisure contract and the future of the 'site' be considered at '**some future point**'.

At the meeting the Liberal Democrats said that they would support the proposal, but would seek to strengthen and improve it by tabling three amendments.

The first amendment sought reassurance that the future of Clair Hall would be properly assessed and that the people of Haywards Heath would not be left deprived of a valuable community asset. The other two amendments would have reassured the public that should the arrangement prove to be unviable, alternatives be scoped and robust cross-party oversight put in place. In what turned into a very ill-tempered meeting, the Conservatives vehemently opposed all three amendments wrongly describing them as 'wrecking motions.'

Cllr Alison Bennett, Liberal Democrat Group Leader said: "It's great news that our leisure centres will open after a frustrating summer of delays. Opening is only possible by spending millions of pounds of Council reserves. This comes with significant risk and drain on tax payers' money. The solution agreed last night is not financially sustainable in the medium term, and will need to be revisited in the coming months. Regrettably, the Conservatives misinterpreted our amendments which would have given the public further assurance that the ongoing provision of leisure in the District is being rigorously planned and overseen."

Cllr Richard Bates, Liberal Democrat (Haywards Heath Ashenground) who proposed the amendment on Clair Hall commented, "As a keen swimmer and member of the Dolphin Leisure Centre, I was happy to support the proposal last night and understand the need to remove Clair Hall from the contract to get leisure centres open. However, without additional reassurances I am very worried that this will be the thin end of the wedge, and we risk losing Clair Hall as a community asset. Incredibly, Conservative councillors from Haywards Heath voted against an amendment that would have made sure that the town does not lose its largest community venue."

Cllr Robert Eggleston, Liberal Democrat Deputy Group Leader commented, "Once again we see that the Mid Sussex Conservatives seem willing to sacrifice culture and the arts. In 2018 the Martlets Hall was

closed and Clair Hall was cited as an alternative venue. Indeed £35,000 of the Martlets relocation fund was used to pay for refurbishments at Clair Hall. Now it looks as though Clair Hall is also going to be chucked under a bus by the Tories.”

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**ENDS**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:**

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**NOTES TO EDITOR:**

1. The report to Council can be found here:  
<https://midsussex.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=139&MId=2508&Ver=4>
2. The Liberal Democrat amendments:

**Amendment 1 (amendment to recommendation (iv))**

Insert after “(paragraphs 48 to 55 refer) in recommendation (iv). The Council will, however,

- (a) review the government guidelines on the opening of community facilities with a view to re-opening Clair Hall in the light of these guidelines;
- (b) undertake a full review of available community facilities in Haywards Heath & Burgess Hill and bring forward recommendations to support the needs of user groups into the future to ensure that there is sufficient provision, taking into account the growth of both towns over the period of the District Plan;
- (c) take no steps to close Clair Hall until it can satisfy the residents of Haywards Heath that like-for-like or better facilities can be made available.

**Amendment 2 (add a new (v))**

That officers prepare a financial analysis and business case for taking all of the leisure centres back in-house and report its findings to the appropriate scrutiny committee by 31st October 2020.

**Amendment 3 (add a new (vi))**

That the review after three months referred to in paragraph 42 includes the Leader and Portfolio Holder together with a nominated person from each of the four political groups on the Council (i.e. Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent).