

6 June 2017

Dear Ms Watts,

Fanshawe Pool and Gym, Ware

I am the Chair of Ware Swimming Club and am writing on behalf of the Club.

Like other people in the area, we learned from a report in the *Hertfordshire Mercury* of 15 June about the East Herts Council meeting on 13 June at which the Council's Executive considered plans for the long-term future of various leisure centres including Fanshawe Pool and Gym. The Council website records that at that meeting "the Executive recommended that in the longer term there would be no major long term investment in Ware's Fanshawe Pool ... The council will hold discussions with [Chauncy School] to explore a mutually agreeable exit strategy." The website concludes by saying that "the recommendations will go to Full Council on July 18 for approval".

The main purpose of this letter is to request that the Council agree to defer any final decision on funding until at least the autumn, rather than putting the recommendation to the full Council for approval on 18 July.

It is likely that the closure of Fanshawe would mean the end of Ware Swimming Club. There are no alternative pools where it could be based. The pools in surrounding towns simply do not have the capacity to take on our Club, which uses Fanshawe for training purposes five days a week and for several galas each year. For one thing, most of the pools already have swimming clubs based at them, including Hartham (which is home to Hertford Swimming Club).

Ware Swimming Club was formed in 1934 and has been a highly successful and active club ever since. It currently has nearly 170 members, almost all of them of school age. It has operated from Fanshawe Pool since that the site opened.

Of course, the closure of the pool would directly affect not just the Club but the whole community. In particular, the pool is also used by several schools in the area, not just the adjoining schools of St Catherine's and Chauncy, including specialist schools where the pupils have a variety of disabilities. It attracts very young children who are learning to swim (a particularly important skill when a town has a river running through it) right up to people in their 80s and beyond who are trying to stay fit and well. It is the venue for the competition between Ware Swimming Club and the swimming club of our German twin town of Wülfrath when that club visits Ware every alternate year – as they have done since 1971.

When the Club learned about the committee meeting from the *Mercury*, we put together a petition. We started taking signatures last Saturday. The petition begins: "We, members of Ware Swimming Club and parents of members, and residents of Ware and surrounding areas, petition East Hertfordshire District Council to keep open Fanshawe Swimming Pool." After some brief details of the background to the petition, it ends: "The closure of the pool at Fanshawe would be a major blow to our town and we urge the Council to provide the necessary funding to keep it open." In the period of less than a week since the petition started, we estimate that we have gathered about 750 signatures. We have not come across a single person who has shown any hesitation in signing; it is no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming response has been one of outrage at the suggestion that the pool might have to close. We shall be sending the petition to you shortly.

On Monday evening we set up an electronic petition: <https://www.change.org/p/save-fanshawe-pool-and->

gym?recruiter=742496830&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=share_petition. You will see that in the few days since then it has been signed by nearly two thousand people. The comments that people have made when signing show the strength of feeling at the prospect of Fanshawe closing, and the many ways that the local community would be damaged. Look, in particular, at the comments from parents of disabled children: Fanshawe is obviously really important in the lives of these children.

Deferring any final decision until at least the autumn would allow for appropriate consultation by East Herts Council with residents of Ware and its surroundings, and with organisations like Ware Swimming Club. Apart from the legal obligations imposed on local authorities in exercising their decision-making powers, it is entirely reasonable for local people to expect proper consultation by a local authority considering such a significant proposal. Deferral for several months is also necessary in order that individuals and organisations are in a position to be able to make informed representations.

Like everyone else, we appreciate that the matter is complicated. We understand that the pool is partly funded by East Herts Council and partly by funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency, an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education; that Fanshawe is on land owned by Chauncy School, the land being highly valuable because of its potential use for housing; and that Fanshawe is run by Sports and Leisure Management (SLM), a leisure management company, under a contract with East Herts Council which is coming to an end quite soon (SLM operating under the name of Everyone Active). But it is precisely because of the complexity that the people of Ware and its surroundings and groups like ours need time to properly understand the situation and perhaps put forward alternatives to Fanshawe closing.

Among the many points that we think need to be considered are the following. What is the basis for the statement by Cllr Eric Buckmaster in a recent email to our head coach, Ms Claire Matthews, that "there is a likelihood, we believe, that [ESFA] funding will cease"? If this belief is correct, then the point is a vital one, so the belief needs to be substantiated. Is Fanshawe being run as well as it could be? We believe that it could be self-funding, or close to this, if managed differently. For example, our Club has long been asking to make greater use of the pool, for which of course we should be quite happy to make the necessary payment, but Everyone Active will not agree to this. And we know of a recently set up freediving club that wanted to be based at Fanshawe but found a lack of interest by the management and so based itself in the town's lido, which welcomed them. What work has been done to seek sponsorship? Glaxo is probably Ware's biggest employer and its site is directly opposite Fanshawe. What involvement has our local MP, Mr Mark Prisk, had so far? He is a long-standing MP with a wide range of ministerial experience and we know that he is already lobbying Ministers for extra money for school budgets. Mr Prisk wrote to you a few days' ago to express his concern about the future of the pool and to let you know that he would be very pleased to try to help to keep it open. What involvement has the Town Council had? These are just some of the questions that people want to see properly addressed and answered. Although we have had little time to study it in detail, the report that seems to have been put before Council committee on 13 June certainly does not appear to deal with questions of this nature:

<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/documents/s39927/Final%20report%20of%20leisure%20ask%20and%20finish%20group%20for%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20June%202017.pdf?J=2>.

I hope that you will be able to confirm that our request for a deferral of any final decision will be met. In any event, please let us have the Council's response to this request by 5 pm next Tuesday, 11 July.

We are forced to give this deadline because of the scheduled Full Council meeting in less than two weeks' time; if the Council is not going to agree to a deferral, we and others need time to take the necessary legal advice on the options open to us, including seeking an injunction.

Please also let me know if the minutes of the meeting on 13 June are going to be published and, if so, when this is likely to happen. If the Council is not proposing to publish them shortly, then please send me a copy, treating this as a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

I should add, finally, that we have been in email correspondence with Mr Prisk MP, and he has been very supportive. At the demonstration of support for keeping the pool open that took place outside Fanshawe early last Saturday morning (reported again by the *Mercury*), councillors from Ware Town Council, including the Town Mayor, Cllr Alex Curtis, voiced their opposition to any closure of the pool. We are sending a copy of this letter to Mr Prisk MP and to Cllr Curtis, and we shall of course forward to them a copy of your response.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Buck (Ms)