

## **SHADSWORTH LEISURE CENTRE – A CASE STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATIONS AND POLITICS**

Shadsworth Leisure Centre was originally planned between 1972-1974 as a Joint Provision Leisure Centre by the soon-to-be-abolished County Borough of Blackburn Council and Lancashire County Council, which would assume control of the Borough's Education establishments from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1974.

The Centre opened to the public in 1974 sharing its site and usage with Shadsworth High School. Its first Manager was Pete Johnson, later to found Circa Leisure (see 8.2). The facilities were fairly typical of the larger Leisure Centres of the mid-1970s, including a five-badminton court Sports Hall, a 25 metre Swimming Pool, two Squash Courts, a Gymnasium area, two Dance/Activity studios and a Seminar Room. The Centre was operated jointly by the new Blackburn Borough Council Recreational Services Department and Lancashire County Council Education Department.

In May 1989 the restructuring of schools by Lancashire County Council saw Shadsworth High School amalgamated with a nearby school to form Queen's Park High School which continued to share its site with Shadsworth Leisure Centre under new Dual Use working arrangements.

Following Local Government restructuring in 1997, the newly-named Blackburn with Darwen Council became a Unitary Authority and the Leisure Services Department and Education Department assumed responsibility for operating the Dual Use arrangements from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1998.

Queen's Park High School became part of the Blackburn with Darwen Education Action Zone in 1998 and received considerable investment in the school facilities and the school was renamed as Queen's Park Technology College in 1999 following its designation as a Specialist Community College.

However, following a further restructuring of schools, Queen's Park Technology College closed in April 2005, to be replaced by Blackburn Central High School on a new site (this school became part of the Champion Education Academy Trust in 2019).

Blackburn with Darwen Leisure Services Department continued to operate Shadsworth as one of their publically-owned Leisure Centres, investing in a modernisation programme for the two studios in 2008 and opening them as Fitness Suites.

In 2007 the Conservative Party had assumed control of Blackburn with Darwen Council and planned a range of cuts to Council Services, which were to include the closure of Shadsworth Leisure Centre. However a local campaign to keep it open resulted in the resignation of the Conservative Chair of the Leisure and Cultural Committee in August 2010 stating "his conscience would not allow him to make the cuts when the town hall was 'wasting' millions of pounds on other projects". As a direct result of his resignation and that of a colleague, the Labour Party was able to

re-gain control of the Council, supported by other minority parties, and was publicly committed to keeping Shadsworth open.

<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/8330129.blackburn-darwen-leisure-chief-quits-shadsworth-axe/>

Shadsworth's reprieve was confirmed with the creation of a support package which, although it meant reduced hours, allowed a Management Board comprising staff, volunteers, leisure centre users and local residents to run the Centre. The target for use in the first year was just over 60,000, but nearly 100,000 visits were achieved between October 2010 and September 2011.

<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/9393945.blackburns-closure-threatened-shadsworth-leisure-centre-nears-100-000-users/>

Some investment continued in Shadsworth, including the refurbishment of the Gym area into one of the Council's new 'Regency Gyms' which were a Borough-wide chain where membership allowed access to all sites. However, continued cuts in the Council's budgets during the 'austerity years' after 2010 resulted in a re-appraisal of the viability of Shadsworth in 2017 and the decision was made to close the Swimming Pool, its last users leaving on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2018. The Council hoped to keep the 'dry side' open but usage had declined dramatically. The Council estimated that running costs would be £141,000 for 2019 with an income in 2018 of only £21,000.

<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/17287093.end-road-leisure-centre-councils-review/>

Despite efforts to identify organisations to keep the centre going at no revenue costs to the Council, no viable alternatives emerged and Shadsworth Leisure Centre closed permanently on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 after 45 years of operation.

Malcolm Tungatt

May 2020