

Mike Halpin recalls that the bid to bring Salisbury into the modern leisure era came off the rails

Salisbury District Council (SDC) was considered to be light years behind its neighbours in the South and South West in possessing a decent modern Sports/Leisure Centre. The District, with a growing population of over 110,000, had been relying on two elderly dual use Sports Centres, both with utilitarian 4 badminton court halls, with these facilities operated by Wiltshire County Education Department.

However, in eventually achieving one of its major leisure objectives, there have been very few leisure projects in this country which have experienced such a rough ride as the Salisbury project.

The story starts in 1986 with SDC finally pushed into getting its approach to its leisure provision and its management together with its first priority to appoint their first Leisure Officer in 1987. That person's highest priority was to advance the Sports/Leisure Centre project, a smaller sports centre in the western parishes and a synthetic athletics track. A highly regarded and long awaited Leisure Officer appointee was faced with making the best of a former Council waste tip as the only site for the Centre within the City boundaries – the geotechnical study commissioned had produced favourable results with positive answers for solving the not inconsiderable methane situation. However, by the end of the appointee's first year they left – the combination of the lure of the private sector the main reason but also some notoriously difficult Council issues not helping in tackling historic problems in a number of the traditional areas. The departure was a major blow for the local authority. Tragedy No 1.

As a parting shot, the Leisure Officer suggested to the Council's Management Team that I, having played a key part in the Crawley and Ipswich success stories, might help cut through some of the many distractions in facing the challenge of developing a new multi leisure approach and getting the Leisure Centre project moving forward. I was "tucked away" at that time in the well thought of Sports Council Southern Region but was duly appointed as Leisure Officer. After a testing start, I sought the help of Roger Quinton, a highly respected and experienced Consultant, and the Salisbury Centre finally started to move forward.

Fast forward with all the planning and other preliminaries out of the way the Clifford Barnett Practice specialising in leisure facilities was awarded a Design and Build contract to build the new Centre with the Sussex based Quantity Surveyors Alex Sayer and Partners representing the Client. Design and Build was still very much a new concept and it didn't matter what the Council's agreed design brief determined, there were many attempts during the contract period to cut corners. Another distraction was also emerging whilst the building was under construction – Competitive Tendering for leisure facilities – non mandatory initially and then compulsory. The writing of a Specification/Contract required additional resources which were not forthcoming and the Council determined that an in house bid was not on the agenda.

With a paucity of interested management companies at that time, Crossland Leisure submitted what proved an over-ambitious tender which a small member/officer subgroup were prepared to accept despite my demonstrating that Crossland's tender was grossly over optimistic in the following areas -

a) that they could run the Centre at no cost to the Council based on a Sport for All specification and

b) that they could fully furnish it at no cost to the Council

I was overruled – the subgroup saying ***"If it all goes wrong, we can always call in the next bid (£200,000 subsidy) – and the Council having to purchase/lease all the equipment.***

Predictably the lead up to the opening was shambolic by any standards, revolving round an inexperienced Manager (fresh from a military PT background) who came with a large hound dog (locked in the office at most times!). The opening weekend featured a car showroom in the Main Hall! It had become obvious quickly that the Company was treading on thin ground (with one of the two Partner Directors already having parted company to set up his own business). Some of the equipment which had to be supplied as part of the tender was not forthcoming and soon Councils around the Country were contacting Salisbury asking for their sports equipment to be returned!

Six months later the doors to the Leisure Centre were padlocked by Bailiffs and an exercise to kick start the Centre on sound grounds was eventually launched. I brought in Bob Tedder and then Tim Hewett - both experienced leisure professionals who helped gradually to turn things around with Rick Weston then running a successful Direct Works led temporary operation albeit under a Refuse/Housing Repair banner!

The Relaxion Group were then appointed and steadied the ship and the Council's other two leisure projects – Tisbury and District Sports Centre and The Salisbury Athletics Track (built on the girls grammar school site adjacent to the Leisure Centre) - also brought some much needed order and encouragement to the leisure and sports scene in Salisbury.

At this point in time the Leisure Centre now called the Five Rivers Health and Well Being Centre, has become one of Wiltshire Council's Hub Centres housing a multitude of new groups and uses including the District HQ'S for the Wilts and Dorset Fire and Rescue Service, The Wiltshire Constabulary and the local Wiltshire Youth Service provision with major new building "add-ons". Only time will tell whether the management challenges that this complex is now throwing up will be successfully met.

Mike Halpin