

ARUN LEISURE CENTRE 1978 – to date [2020]: A Survivor

Joint scheme meets school and community needs

❖ *40 going on 50!*

Arun Leisure Centre (ALC) reached its 40th birthday in 2018 and is one of the longest surviving joint provision centres in the country. It is essentially the same core, free-standing building, alongside the school in Felpham, Bognor Regis, that, in 1976, West Sussex CC (WSCC) and Arun DC (ADC) had jointly agreed to build. There have been renovations along the way and the major addition of a swimming pool, but generally, with exceptions, the building has withstood the test of time so far.



The first decade: 1978-1987

❖ *Leisure centre and school*

Arun Leisure Centre was opened in 1978 by the Duchess of Norfolk. It was built as a free-standing leisure complex alongside Felpham Comprehensive School (now Felpham Community College). The adjoining Arun Leisure Centre was part of a joint provision (dual use) agreement between West Sussex County Council and Arun District Council, forged from 1976. By this time legal agreements for joint provision were becoming common, but nonetheless detailed legal documents. Under the agreement the School had agreed term-time daytime access to the leisure facilities and the County's Youth Wing and Adult Education services were entitled to run and charge for courses weekly, in allocated early evening time.

Felpham Community College is a maintained comprehensive secondary school for pupils aged 11 to 18. It caters to approximately 1400 pupils in Years 7 to 13, including nearly 200 in its sixth form. Until the 1970s, students from primary schools in the village of Felpham attended secondary schools in the main town, nearby Bognor Regis. The Felpham school opened in 1974/5, but without sports facilities as the joint discussions were underway. In 1978 the school accommodated around 800 pupils and in 1980 the initial intake of pupils had reached the sixth form. The school was renamed as Felpham Community College in 1991 by which time pupil number had risen to around 1300. The school aims to raise the pupil number by 420 people by 2023, which will be an increase of over 1,200 pupils on the starting point in 1978. There have therefore been many additional pressures on the design and maintenance of the sports facilities from the annual throughput of school children, and on car parking from V11th form pupils and daytime centre visitors.

❖ *Facilities*

By the time **Arun Leisure Centre** was being planned, sports centres had started to enter the leisure era. The design, facilities and fittings of the Centre therefore sought to meet both emerging community leisure and social needs and developing trends in schools. Thus, there was an emphasis on including generous social provision for the community on the first floor.

In addition to the main sports hall, unusually the sports hall adjoined a gymnasium (18m x 16m) with wall bars akin to a traditional school gym. This provided much flexibility for school daytime programming. The Centre facilities provided at the beginning in 1978 were: - Arundel (sports) Hall; Fitness studio; Gymnasium; Bramber Studio; Music rooms, 4 squash courts as well as the Amberley Lounge, Bar and the adjoining Pevensey Lounge, plus changing rooms and toilets. Outdoors there was a large dri-pla (shale) area for hockey and football practice.

Below is the basic layout up to 2012, including the addition of the 8-lane Swimming Pool in 1996 and after the upstairs kitchen/catering facilities had been removed.



There were always issues around who had the right to use the facilities with access and security always being a concern particularly at Youth Club sessions, which acted as a 'honeypot' for those who came on to the site but were not part of the formal management arrangements, however management relationships on the ground were always constructive and positive.

❖ ***Joint Provision Agreement and Management Committee***

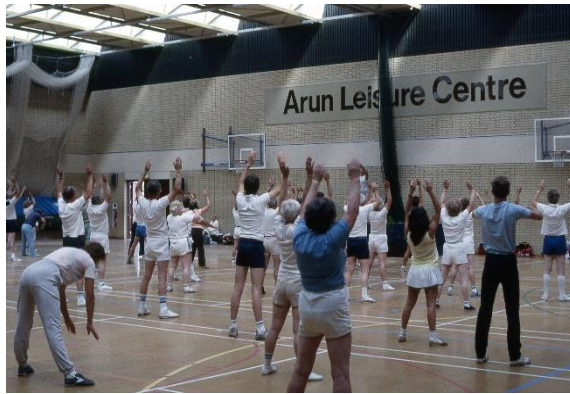
The Joint Provision and Dual Use Agreement generally followed the accepted pattern nationally. The Management Committee met quarterly and originally comprised six members - 2 WSCC Councillors, 2 Arun DC Councillors, 2 School Governors plus the School Headmaster. The Management Committee was served by a senior Arun DC officer and the Centre Manager up until 2006. The Agreement was amended in 2006, although not signed until 2011, to also include 2 Trustees from the managing trust, with attendance from the CEO of the trust. Whilst there was a Joint Liaison Group in the original agreement it did not function effectively with only a few meetings between 2006 to 2016. Certainly, during the early years, the Committee benefited from the support and interest and understanding of: -

- County Councillor Alex Sayer, founder and Managing Director of Alex Sayer and Partners (now part of BAQUS) and
- School Headmaster, Brian Swanson.



❖ ***Early management and programming***

Early programming priorities included bedding down the four user groups – school, public, adult evening classes and the youth service. A joint provision centre that combines school use with daytime public use has special responsibilities for managing this interface. The school use in the day included the main hall, gymnasium, weights room, the classrooms (used for Music and Drama), an additional drama room (Bramber Studio), the Outdoor 'Red-gras area' and one of the squash courts. The public programme built up and followed expected patterns with weekday evenings, especially Monday to Thursday being popular and busy for a range of activities including of course badminton and five-a-side football. Use by clubs was prominent e.g. badminton, gymnastics, squash and volleyball. In those days of course the demand for squash was immense.



Keep Fit Session



General Election Count

Weekends in the sports hall in the early days were not so busy and several initiatives were undertaken. It was agreed that Saturday daytime would be kept free from regular bookings so that special events could be hosted. Over the decades the Centre became the annual venue for the British Gymnastics Team Championships, and for dog shows, local flower shows, Christmas Fayres and on one occasion BBC TV's Antique Roadshow. There were also community competitions such as 'Superstars' and 'Junior Superstars'. Sports tournaments were also hosted, including basketball and volleyball. An evening indoor cricket league was another successful development. Roller skating sessions, popular with youngsters, were developed as a weekend activity in the sports hall. The 'Granwood' floor permitted this activity. An 'Ace of Clubs' event promoted by the Centre saw the Bognor Cricket, Football, Rugby Hockey and Tennis Clubs compete against each other in various races and skills test for an overall Trophy. This all made for an interesting, varied and full weekend programme. In later years, a strong gymnastics club developed, based on regular and extensive use of the sports hall during the week. As with many sports centres, the sports hall was an ideal venue for election counts.



The Amberley Lounge and Bar on the first floor were divisible and geared to both catering for everyday users and for special functions. The adjoining Pevensy Lounge was available for meetings and small functions. Midland Catering were contracted to operate the catering and bar initially, but when re-tendered in 1981-82 the contract went to Caterleisure who operated the catering for many years until the mid 1990's when it was brought back in house.

1981-1998 Continuation under Arun DC Management

❖ *New appointments set the scene*

The first Centre Manager, Les Spiers left in 1981, moving to Gosport Borough Council. In the same year Arun DC's Amenities Officer, Neville Westgate, retired and ADC recruited Roger Quinton from Swindon Borough Council as Chief Leisure & Tourism Officer. Mike Monk was appointed that year as the new ALC Manager. The new regime saw the Centre more integrated into the management, operation and activities of the newly formed Leisure and Tourism Department. Gradually, with departures, a new centre management team was recruited. This included a new appointment of a Trainee Manager to the team, as part of the Department's forward planning. The period from 1981 to around 2006 continued under the direct management of Arun DC. This was a fairly stable period in terms of the joint partnership, although use, or rather periodic non-use of the designated Youth Service time on two evenings a week was an issue, when the public could have made use of the time and additional income could have been generated.

One event recalled from the mid-1980s was not planned! A fire was started by vandalism which set stored curtains alight in the Bramber Studio. The centre corridors filled with dense smoke (akin to the Maysfield LC tragedy). The Centre was evacuated successfully before the fire brigade arrived and there were no injuries.

• *Swimming pool talk*



In 1992, a new artificial turf pitch (ATP) jointly funded by two the local Hockey Clubs, The Foundation for Sports and the Arts and Arun DC, replaced the 'Shale pitch'. From 1992 there was talk of adding a swimming pool to the Centre. Arun had opened a new Swimming Centre in Littlehampton in 1983 and Bognor Regis had no swimming pool (other than that at Butlins, Bognor). In 1992 the car park was extended, reflecting both centre use and the aspirations for a 6-lane swimming pool.

A feasibility study for a new swimming pool was undertaken for Arun DC by Gwynne Griffiths on behalf of George Torkildsen. There was local pressure, especially from the local swimming club and the Parish Council, for a 25m 8-lane pool (despite similar pressure, Littlehampton Swimming Centre had a 6-lane 25m pool). As a result of the feasibility study and the pressure, Arun DC agreed to provide an 8-lane pool. As Arun DC alone was providing the pool, WSCC leased the land for the pool and car parks to Arun DC until 12th December 2054 with rent being offset against free use of the pool up to a specific number of hours (6) per week in term time for the on-site College and its local Primary Feeder Schools.



1998-2006: Arms Length DSO approach

❖ *National management trends come to bear*

By now Competitive Tendering was well under way nationally and moving on to Best Value and Options Appraisals. From 1998 to 2006 Arun continue to manage within, under a very arbitrary 'arm's length' Direct Service Organisation type approach. However, a Best Value Review in 2002 opened up the option for trust management. A subsequent 2003 Options Appraisal identified managing the Centre through a trust arrangement as a viable route. The Appraisal identified ALC as a large and busy centre with a 'downward spiral of decline' in the facility quality; an increasing subsidy; inadequate (under) investment leading to loss of income, and complex (although cordial) management arrangements, It recorded that there were opportunities for refining and creating better use of space internally, improved presentation plus the potential for an 'upward spiral of success' through the creation of a Non-Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO).

❖ *The birth of the Inspire Leisure trust*

As a result, Arun DC decided to plan the development of a new Arun-based NPDO trust, advised by specialist legal expertise. It established an NPDO which became known as the 'Inspire Leisure' Trust. It was to have a broad remit across a range of Council 'sports, leisure and amenity services'. Inspire took two leases for the Centre on what had become 'two sets of bricks'. The Centre buildings from 1978, which were jointly owned by WSCC, were one 'set of bricks' and known as the 'Dry Side' and the pool extension, which was funded and owned by Arun, was a second 'set of bricks' and known as the 'Wet Side'. The Inspire Leisure Management Contract was for 10 years from the 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2016. John Stride, a senior member of Arun's leisure staff since 1987, was closely involved in the planning for the Trust and was appointed as its CEO from the 1st April 2006.

At the same time Mike Monk brought to an end a 25-year role as ALC Manager. His aspiration for a swimming pool had been fulfilled and he had been a reliable and committed Manager for a quarter of a century, longer than most UK managers.

2006-2020: Management by a Trust

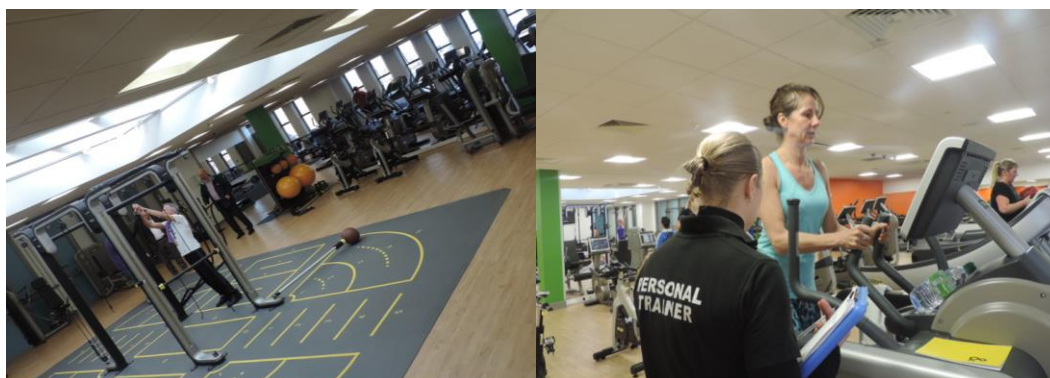
❖ *Ten years of Inspire Leisure Trust management*

The last fifteen years have seen ALC managed successively by two trusts under the dual use agreement, duly amended, as they are in these circumstances, to lease the facilities to the managing trust for the life only of its management contract.

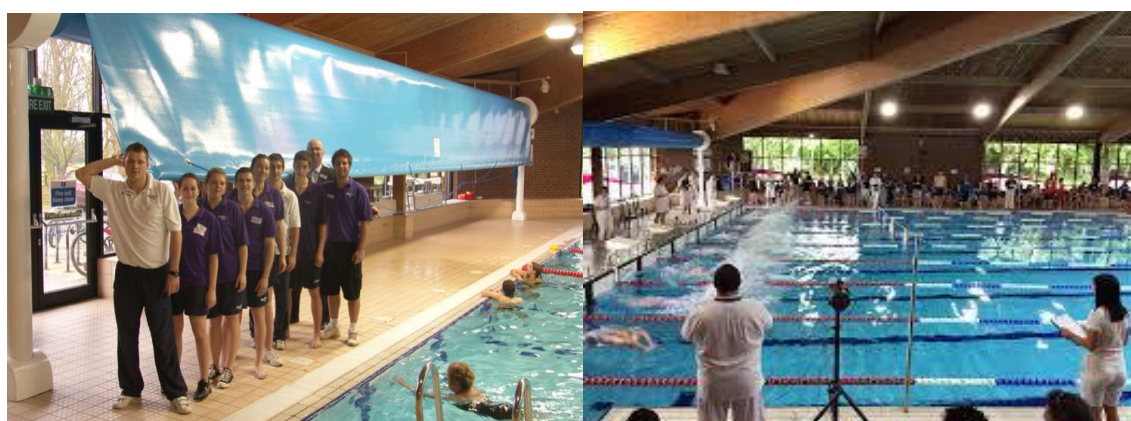


Inspire Leisure successfully managed Arun Leisure Centre, branded as '**Inspire Felpham**', for 10 years from 2006. As a small, local Trust, Inspire achieved a huge amount across the Arun District over the period. Its greatest achievements at Arun LC were: -

- The development of a new, large modern fitness gym in place of the Amberley Lounge on the first floor. This not only increased the appeal of the Centre and its range of recreation facilities but increased the centre's income considerably.



- Total investment in the gym refurbishment and equipment, spinning studio, hydro spin bikes, reception, pool covers, improved pool filtration and changing rooms of £1M. This included In 2015:
- the replacement of the original 1992 artificial turf pitch with a 5G ATP pitch at a cost of £350,000. Further expansion of the gym from 43 to 53 stations, with an alteration to the management fee.





- Annual cost savings of 40% over ten years and a 20% annual increase on repairs and maintenance expenditure over that budgeted.
- Increased annual attendances of 32% between 2006 and 2016.



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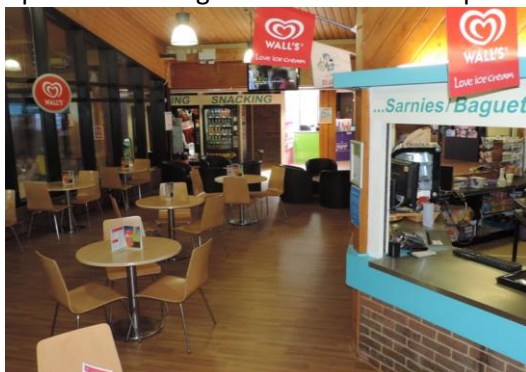
www.inspireleisure.co.uk
Reinvesting in your Community

ALC LSSC
* Correct as of June 27th 2009

- The conversion of a squash court into an upstairs studio and a downstairs cycle/spinning room.



- Improved catering area and membership sales area



- An upward 'Spiral of Success'.

Inspire Leisure loses out to Freedom Leisure

Despite Inspire Leisure's success and progress with facility development and financial and operational issues at Arun Leisure Centre, it was not awarded the opportunity for a further 10-year contract across Arun's sport & leisure portfolio. In a tender battle of the more established national and regional trusts with larger turnover, Freedom Leisure, which had originally evolved from a single authority trust, at Wealden DC, won the day in 2016. This was despite Inspire Leisure being prepared to offer in excess of a further £1.0m to immediately re-invest in the overall contract if it had been successful.

Freedom Leisure was awarded a 10-year Arun DC contract to 31st March 2026. Freedom had offered funding for an investment plan for the reception, cafe, changing rooms and toilets, However, Arun DC decided to fund the plan itself (at around £1M) and make an adjustment accordingly to the contract fee.



The Future

❖ *A long-term vision for replacement of Arun Leisure Centre*

In 2017 the Bognor Regis Post reported that Arun's indoor sports and leisure facility strategy (2011-2031) had highlighted that Arun Leisure Centre will be 50 years old in 2027 and the swimming pool over 30 years old. Councillors agreed to review the future requirements needed to potentially replace the centre in about 20 years. (*Ed. This may or may not prove a feasible time scale!*) It was agreed by councillors that consideration of the best site for a new leisure centre for Bognor Regis, and its surroundings, will need to take account of the large developments already taking place and planned for the area. Because of the current provision, consultations with West Sussex County Council and Felpham Community College will be paramount in such deliberations.