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Councillors give all-clear to under-fire trusts plan

by **Gary Fitzpatrick**

FIFE COUNCIL has made the landmark decision to hand over its leisure centres, swimming pools and theatres to trusts – unanimously but reluctantly.



Photo Credit: **Dunfermline Press**
CarnegieCentre5843

Work on a £13 million refurbishment of the Carnegie Centre in Dunfermline could get under way next year.

Bruce Street and Dalgety Bay sports centres will also be run by the leisure trust.

The arts and theatres trust, which will take over the running of the Carnegie Hall and other council-run venues, should be up and running in June.

With criticism of the move to trusts from a Labour MSP, senior party activists and the trade unions, there was some expectation of fireworks at Friday's adult services committee.

However, this failed to materialise with all parties apparently resigned to the fact that trusts were "the only game in town".

This was despite a letter from Unison to committee members raising their concerns.

The lack of any opposition to trusts at the meeting was only matched by the lack of any real enthusiasm for them.

Indeed, the man pushing for the move, community services spokesman Jim Brennan, expressed more reservations than most about the principles involved.

The process towards creating the theatres and arts trust is the furthest advanced and should be set up on 1st June.

For the Lib Dems, Gerry McMullan said he fully supported any steps to improve sporting facilities in Fife adding, "They've been neglected for too long".

Labour's David Arnott, a former head of community services with Dunfermline District Council, said, "I've long held the view that recreational facilities in Fife have led the country and that goes back 50 years.

"I'm delighted to see that's going to be maintained. On trusts, in years gone by I would have been totally opposed but we're in a whole new world. It's a new ball game."

He said the only alternative to a trust would be to "totally decimate our existing capital programme".

Lib Dem Jim Tolson said, "We'll see a generational change in sports and leisure facilities in Fife".

He had been concerned for a long time about Carnegie Centre having to close its doors if its "ancient facilities had broken down".

The SNP's Alf Patey was pleased that the type of trust being set up would see the buildings stay in the ownership of the council.

Labour's Bill Kay said, "I do wish that the Scottish Executive, who keep rabbiting on about obesity and getting fit would put their hands in their pocket and give us a pile of money for it."

He added, "The idea that's being put about that somehow we're offloading our facilities to some quango is nonsense."

Labour's Fiona Purdon asked how much it would add to the council tax bill if the leisure spending programme went ahead without a trust – £18 a year per household came the reply from head of finance Brian Lawrie.

Tory Mike Scott-Hayward said he'd always been happy with the principle of trusts but thought there should be more than one for the 12 Fife sports centres involved.

The SNP's George Leslie said he had heard about the collapse of trusts in other areas and highlighted concerns raised by Unison.

His colleague, Fiona Grant, said the problem was the lack of funding from central government.

"If the council had been given enough money for leisure facilities in previous years they wouldn't be in the state they are now," she said.

"I'm also concerned about some of the language used such as 'the only game in town'. That was the same thing we were told about PFI and we are now told that has not been a good use of public money."

Labour's Margot Doig said she hoped lessons would be learned from the mistakes of the Beacon Leisure Centre trust in Burntisland, which had to revert to being council-run.

Councillor Brennan said "We've set out on this route reluctantly. In Fife we've

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"We're on this route. Personally, it's the rotten first step but now it's here and we have to work with it."

The motion to set up a leisure trust was passed unopposed.

When attention turned to the arts trust, Councillor Brennan hit out at Unison officers for failing to keep their members informed.

He said the letter sent from Unison to committee members was "a piece of nonsense".

Councillor McMullan said, "We all know why Unison is getting involved. It's about political gain for certain individuals."

Labour's John Mackenzie expressed grave doubts about the council giving up its facilities.

"When councils in England are being given more powers, here we are being asked to relinquish control over matters that should remain in the public domain because of inadequate funding."

He said it was getting to the stage that the only job left for councils would be to pick up rubbish.

"I have genuine fears about this. It's not something new or exciting. It's depressing actually."

Councillor Grant said the setting up of trusts reminded of her of the Proclaimers' song, "Swimming pools no more, theatres no more – what's left in council services?"

Councillor Arnott was concerned to hear Carnegie Dunfermline Trust had some worries about the Glen Pavilion going to the arts and theatre trust. He said if the Carnegie Trust did not want to participate, the council should look at how much it spent on Pittencrieff Park every year.

Councillor Tolson said there had not been the same amount of consultation on the theatres trust as there had been on leisure and one of his colleagues had urged him not to back the proposals because of that.

However, the move to an arts and theatres trust was also confirmed without opposition.

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