

# Focus on Whickham North and Swalwell

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## Council delay closure decision until after local elections

### Dunston Pool may be saved

**Amid angry scenes at Gateshead Council's cabinet in January, Labour abandoned plans to close Dunston and other leisure centres until after local elections in May.**

The all-Labour cabinet met on 24th January to consider plans to close Gateshead Leisure Centre and Birtley Swimming Centre. In October the Council had consulted on the possible closures of Gateshead and Dunston, with Birtley Sports Hall also a possibility.

A last minute reprieve for Dunston however has come in the form of a possible takeover by swimming clubs which could run the centre independently of the Council. This could be good news for the many Whickham and Swalwell residents who use the leisure services.



The future of Dunston Pool is uncertain at the moment.

Angry protesters and residents packed the public gallery at Gateshead Civic Centre when the cabinet met. Behind the scenes before the cabinet meeting, Labour councillors threw together a new set of proposals to delay by three months the decision - although they were unclear on the precise timing.

The move will require about £700,000 from reserves to be spent keeping open the two facilities Labour wanted to close - although again, they were unable to give a precise figure.

Protesters had backed the Lib Dem call for the centres to be retained for the year ahead, using an extra £1.4m from reserves.

Lib Dem councillors and protesters believe that the delay until the early summer will not give sufficient time for plans to be completed for community groups to take over the centres. That's why they want them to remain open for the year ahead, rather than just 3 months.

### Set up to Fail?

"It is very difficult to complete the asset transfer of a leisure centre in 3 months." said **Chris Ord**. "the ones that we know about have taken almost 18 months. We can't help but feel that they are being set up to fail so the Council can close at least two centres."

### Saving Labour's skin?

Campaigners speaking at the cabinet meeting said that the delay is more about saving Labour from election defeat. The two centres now at risk are in Labour's most marginal wards; Saltwell and Birtley.

Residents are saying that Labour have been in power in Gateshead for 50 years - and that they blame everyone else when they make a mess - but really they have only themselves to blame.

## Council budget: Mixed News

Gateshead's Labour Council has voted for another 4.99% increase in Council Tax.

They will also spend £26m from reserves - and some of the planned cuts won't now go ahead.

Alongside your Focus Team, residents were angry with plans to cut environmental services. Cuts to the graffiti service and street cleaning, the removal of the last dog warden and our countryside ranger, amongst others, won't now go ahead -and £2M extra spending on Environmental Services has also been agreed.

**Sonya Hawkins** said: "We are pleased that this year the Council Tax hike won't be used to increase Council reserves."

**Chris Ord** continued "The Focus Team had condemned cuts to environmental services, and it's right that these have been reversed. Perhaps Labour is starting to listen and that's not before time."

One cut that will go ahead after receiving 93% approval from residents is that Council News will be reduced from 4 issues each year to 2. "We have been arguing for this for years." said **Peter Craig**.

## Lib Dem plan to save leisure centres rejected



The Lib Dem team that voted for the plan to save our leisure centres.

The Lib Dem plan to save our leisure centres has been rejected by Labour at the annual Budget meeting.

In January the Labour cabinet agreed to spend £700,000 to pause the closure of leisure centres by three months. The Lib Dems wanted an additional £1.4m be spent to give enough time for a working group of industry experts, campaigners and council staff to make real changes.

All 15 Lib Dem councillors voted for their plan but 40 Labour councillors voted this down and 9 Labour councillors missed the meeting altogether.

**Chris Ord** said "Last May, Labour's election leaflets said that leisure centres were safe. By October they were planning to close three of them, including Dunston. Then in January they proposed to close centres in Gateshead and Birtley - now they will only fund them until the summer."

"The Lib Dems agree with campaigners that time is needed for a proper plan to be developed but Labour just won't listen."

# Chris selected as Lib Dem candidate



Chris Ord has been selected by local Lib Dem members to stand in this May's local election.

Chris was first elected to Gateshead Council in 1992 at the age of 24 and has been active in the community and standing up for residents ever since.

Chris said "If I win again this May I will be part of a growing number of Lib Dem councillors fighting for a greener, cleaner and more efficient Council. Next year Labour will have run Gateshead for 50 years.

That's long enough and as the only opposition party on the Council, we are the people to change it."

## Newly refurbished community room at Whickham Library

Whickham Voluntary Library have now completed the refurbishment of their community room. It forms part of the Library's "warm space" and is used by many local residents, not just in Whickham but in the wider community.

Library trustee **Peter Craig** reports "This is a great facility. Any local resident can visit the community room to stay warm and meet up and chat to others. And while people are here, we are also encouraging them to use the library service as well and borrow a book or two."



The newly refurbished community room with furniture donated by Virgin Money.



• Between them, Peter, Sonya & Chris have 60 years experience as a ward councillor and are always available to help if you need them.

# ID now needed to vote in local elections

## POLLING STATION

In a change to proceedings, this year for the first time, residents in Gateshead will need to show photographic ID to vote at a polling station.

Residents in Swalwell and Whickham are being urged to make sure they are ready to vote in the local elections in May by checking they have an accepted form of ID.

Accepted forms of ID include a UK, European Economic Area (EEA) or Commonwealth passport; a UK or EEA drivers' licence; and some concessionary travel passes, such as an older person's bus pass or an Oyster 60+ card. Voters will be able to use expired ID if they are still recognisable from the photo.

**Sonya Hawkins** advised "Anyone who does not have one of the accepted forms of ID will be able to apply for free ID online or by completing a paper form. If you need assistance, please contact one of your ward councillors."

## Boundary Commission review in progress

For the first time in 20 years the Boundary Commission is reviewing Gateshead's Council size and ward boundaries. Following last year's petition Lib Dems have argued for a smaller Council.

**Chris Ord** said "Lib Dem research has shown that Gateshead has the second highest number of councillors per resident of all urban councils."

"There is one councillor for roughly 3000 residents in Gateshead compared to one for every 8000 in Leeds and one for nearly 4,000 in Newcastle.

"So why does it take more Labour Councillors to run Gateshead than anywhere else?"

"Reducing the number of councillors would save hundreds of thousand of pounds and make the Council more efficient."

If you would like a copy of the Lib Dem's response to the Boundary Commission, please contact Chris Ord.



## Focus Team

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