

# Blyth Lifeguard & Swimming Club



## OFFICIAL STATEMENT - DAVE STEPHENS CENTRE

Lots of rumours and statements from other organisations have been circulating around but as a Club, we have published very little about this and as a Club, we feel we need to clarify our position/decisions.

### History

The Club was approached by Blyth Borough Council in 1961 to provide a lifeguard service after a member of the public sadly drowned with nobody to protect them. The Club have provided lifeguard cover ever since on weekends and Bank Holidays. The Club have never received any money from the Council towards equipment, all we asked was a building to operate the lifeguard service from and the Club would fundraise/cover the costs to provide a safe up-to-date service run by highly trained club members.

### Dave Stephens Centre

In 2006 the Club was approached by the Council when the current observation post at the Blyth Battery required major repairs. The Council informed us that they were building a new public toilet and they would be willing to seek extra funding to develop a purpose-built lifeguard tower and training room for us on top of the toilets. The Club were involved in every stage of the development, even going up in a cherry picker to work out the ideal height of the lookout tower.

The development proposal of the 2006 planning application and permission for the Dave Stephens Centre is: **Proposed building to provide public conveniences and facilities for water/beach users. Observation tower, training and support facilities for volunteer lifeguard service.**

The 2006 planning application was granted specifically to deliver lifeguard services and training. The planning permission remains the lawful use of the building including the lifeguard use of the Ground, 1st, and 2nd floors is detailed on the approved plans of the 2006 permission.

In 2008 the Club moved into the building and has delivered the lifeguard service from there ever since. With the major leisure centre restructuring within Northumberland and the transfer from Active Northumberland, the Club was notified that the Dave Stephens Centre (along with other non-leisure centre buildings) was excluded from that process and it had been transferred to another organisation as part of a community asset transfer.

Entirely unexpectedly, the Club received an email on 28th March asking us to vacate the training room by 8th April and the garages by 15th April. Sourcing storage for the amount of lifesaving equipment that had been stored at the Dave Stephens Centre

(linked with no clarification from the Council as to what alternative accommodation or support was available) the Club was unable to vacate in the timeframe stated

The Club has had several meetings with the organisation looking after the building, Elected Councillors and Northumberland County Council to try and reach a mutual agreement that all sides are happy with and look at what support would be available to the Club.

### **Blyth Beach Definition (Definition - Rural or Urban)**

Blyth Beach is currently classified as a rural beach and therefore the Council have confirmed they have no obligation to provide a lifeguard service. If Blyth Beach was classified as an urban beach (like North Tyneside beaches) the Council would be required to fund the lifeguard service.

The Club has been supported by a professional consultant who provided detailed research into the demographics of Blyth, Blyth Beach, and the surrounding areas. The report provided confirms that the population of Blyth (40,000 people approx), the scale of the Town, the services and facilities at Blyth Beach (and the additional hotel and public house detailed for Phase 2 adjacent to the Co-Op), the new railway station providing additional access for visitors, and the high visitor numbers (local and from the wider area) confirm Blyth Beach is an urban beach. The definition of Blyth Beach as an urban beach is supported by the RNLI and the RLSS.

### **Lifeguard Services**

As a Club, our only priority at Blyth Beach is to protect our members and the public we serve. To do that we have very few requirements and those were presented as part of the recent discussions and meetings.

The Club are all volunteers, and the Club does not receive any money for providing the lifeguard service, the Club provide the service for the safety of the local community. For that reason, the Club cannot enter into financial agreements that funding may or may not be available to cover. These are the requests the Club submitted as part of the recent discussions and meetings to ensure the Club can run a safe effective service with access to all the equipment that is needed. Not every incident the Club responds to is the same and because of that we need a wide range of equipment we can access quickly and without limitation or restriction.

### **1. The Lifeguard Tower will be for the sole use of BLSC. Sole use is required for health and safety purposes, and to provide a secure area for BLSC equipment (including radios, and other associated equipment).**

This is purely the lookout tower as this allows us to set up radio equipment allowing us to communicate with the coastguard, and store vital first aid equipment that we couldn't transport every day (this would require a personal responsibility for charging the radios overnight and bringing them to the building).

The Club was informed there would never be a charge for this part of the building as it was unusable for any other activity. Since we wouldn't have any other storage in the building this would allow us to empty the training room for use during the week and outside the summer.

**2. A key shall be provided to BLSC for the Lifeguard Tower to ensure the tower is locked when not in use. A key shall remain with BLSC at all times, it is common ground with BVEL that there is no operational or any other reason for BVEL or the general public to access the Lifeguard Tower.**

As mentioned in point 1 if we were to store radios and first aid equipment here we needed this to be locked and not accessible by everyone using the centre.

**3. The Lifeguard Tower and Lifeguard Club Room will be for the sole use of BLSC during lifeguard service/patrol hours: 12pm to 7pm Saturday and Sunday, May 24th until September 7th.**

We were happy to move all equipment out of this room so it could be used by other groups during the week we just wanted some assurances that in the event of an incident, we didn't have other groups coming in whilst we were on duty or waiting to come in straight after we finished.

**4. A key shall be provided to BLSC for access to the Dave Stephens Centre during the times detailed in No.3 (above). The key shall be for the rear door of the Dave Stephens Centre and will allow for unimpeded access/egress at the building during the hours agreed in No.3 (above). A lifeguard service requires unimpeded access/egress to their Lifeguard Tower and Lifeguard Club Room as any obstruction can directly affect the safe and effective delivery of the lifeguard service.**

If there was any sickness or issues with staffing to open the centre or we needed to open or lock the building whilst responding to an incident and there were no staff about we needed to ensure we could access all our equipment.

**5. BLSC shall have shared access to a dedicated medical room between the hours of 12pm to 7pm Saturday and Sunday, May 24th until September 7th.**

If we were to get a major first aid it is impractical to carry a patient upstairs to treat them whilst we wait for an ambulance.

**6. A single garage shall be retained on an annual basis and for the sole use of BLSC.**

We store essential lifesaving equipment including 10ft swell boards that do not fit in cars. We need to store these near where we operate as during an incident we need very quick access to them.

**7. Running water is required outside, ideally from the garage to wash and rinse equipment.**

The salt destroys our equipment so we need somewhere to wash it after it has been used.

**8. BLSC needs to provide hot drinks and food for volunteers in the lifeguard club room during their break, after incidents or after training. We therefore need a suitable kitchen area as this is an essential welfare requirement.**

There is currently a kitchen area but we are unaware of what the plans are for the lifeguard club room.

**9. BLSC needs access to the outside of the building to fly a flag informing the public that lifeguards are present and on duty.**

We will display a flag to show that lifeguards are on duty or if the water is unsafe to enter and wanted to make sure we could still do this.

#### **Additional Information - Queries**

To clarify queries the Club has received;

- Q.1 Over 10 years ago the Club changed the locks to the lifeguard club room and observation tower after equipment, drinks and food were constantly going missing as well as the Club photocopier being used. A copy of these keys was given to Active Northumberland at the time so they had them in case of an emergency. The Club did not change the locks to the actual centre or any of the shared spaces. At no other time have we changed any locks within the centre.
- Q.2 The Club occupied a double garage (as per the planning permission) but was happy for these to be separated and occupy just one garage. The Club was quoted £3000 per garage per year, we had no assurance that we would be eligible for funding so this was impossible for us to agree to without knowing. The alternate storage we were offered inside the building was a singular locker, the rescue boards which we use during incidents are 10ft long so that was impractical.
- Q.3 The Club was offered the first year free but if the centre wasn't self-sufficient by the second year it would be at £15 per hour. A cost of over £2000 a year to provide a voluntary service, again with no guarantee of funding and no support available.
- Q.4 The Club has never charged a fee to schools if a school group was coming down to the beach and asked the club if we could provide a lifeguard. This could be any day of the week and part of this would allow us to give a water safety presentation to the children. We would do this voluntarily as requested but this would have been dependent on access to the building going forwards.
- Q.5 It was never a training service that the Club operated from 13:00 to 17:00, it was a lifeguard service run by qualified lifeguards. We did in addition to that train lifeguards but that was never to the detriment of the lifeguard service we were providing.

## **Summary**

We appreciate and respect all the work being done to utilize the centre to its full potential. The positive impact on the local community, the creation of new jobs, and the increase in tourism are all very exciting for Blyth. We genuinely wanted to be part of this initiative and are devastated that we haven't reached an agreement.

Our offer represented the minimum needed to run a safe and effective service, ensuring the safety of our members and the public. As a voluntary organisation with no regular income, we could not commit to any financial liability given the uncertainty over available funding.