

**Report to:** Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

**Date:** 4 November 2024

**By:** Director of Children's Services

**Title of report:** Future operation of Buzz Active, Outdoor Activities provision in East Sussex

**Purpose of report:** To seek approval to undertake a sale / transfer of entity process to identify a viable alternative provider to operate Buzz Active in place of the Council

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Lead Member is recommended to:

- 1) Approve the proposal to seek an alternative provider to operate Buzz Active;
- 2) Agree that, provided a suitable alternative provider can be identified, Buzz Active will be transferred through either a sale or transfer of entity;
- 3) Delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to determine the most suitable third party to take over Buzz Active, agree the terms of any sale or transfer and to authorise the Council entering into such legal agreements as are necessary to give effect to the sale or transfer of Buzz Active; and
- 4) Delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to carry out all other actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.

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## **1 Background**

1.1 Buzz Active, which sits within the Children's Services department, is a Council run service that offers outdoor activities, to children and adults, supporting around 20,000 visits per year. Buzz Active specialises in sail sports, paddle sports and a range of land-based activities, including target sports, high ropes and bush craft.

1.2 Buzz Active operates out of 3 activity centres, offering day visit and residential activity provision in beautiful settings across East Sussex. The centres are located in Eastbourne, Hailsham and Cuckmere Haven, and have a suite of activity equipment to suit a wide range of user needs, including specialist, inclusive equipment, specifically designed to cater for those with additional needs and requirements.

1.3 The activity offers available at these 3 sites are well placed for schools and educational groups wanting to offer their students options for curriculum linked learning, with the land based offer able to run all year round. Accredited training and the opportunity for children and young people to learn, build on their skills and excel in sailing and other water sports makes both the Cuckmere and Eastbourne sites popular for a wide range of schools. Memberships, courses and day activities also make the centres popular with adults as well as children and young people.

1.4 More recently, Buzz Active has been providing residential camping stays which make use of all 3 activity centres. These have been growing in popularity, particularly for transition or Year 6 summer term events, with class or whole year groups being successfully catered for.

1.5 Following positive government funding opportunities post-Covid in 2021/22 and 2022/23, Buzz Active has been able to offer an inclusive range of activities for children, young people and their families (including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the wider community) to enjoy year-round, including a fully inclusive high ropes and climbing structure. A local special school has signed up to a 5-day, year-long programme of activities for all year groups within their care.

1.6 Buzz Active is also a core provider of the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) provision for East Sussex – offering fantastic activities for some of East Sussex’s most vulnerable children, including forging strong working relationships with early help, social care and looked after children teams within the Children’s Services department.

## **2 Supporting information**

2.1 Whilst the Council runs the services, the sites where Buzz Active are located are owned by other parties. The Council has arrangements in place to use each of the 3 sites, and benefits from strong collaborative working arrangements with the land owners (Eastbourne Borough Council, for the Eastbourne Parade site, South Downs National Park for Cuckmere Haven and Eastbourne Scouts for Bushy Wood in Hailsham).

2.2 The Buzz Active service complements the Council’s priority outcomes of keeping vulnerable people safe and driving sustainable economic growth. It provides opportunities for children of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to experience the benefits of taking part in outdoor sport and activities. This includes benefits to mental and physical wellbeing and individual, social and community development. The service also promotes local employment and has fostered excellent links with schools within the county.

2.3 The Council, like all other local authorities, is facing significant financial pressures. Currently the expenditure required to maintain Buzz Active is around £100,000 per annum. As Buzz Active is not a statutory service, the Council has taken the opportunity to explore options to run Buzz Active differently to ensure a sustainable and financially viable future for this valued service whilst protecting the Council from increasing operational costs and cost uncertainty.

2.4 The ability to adapt quickly, embrace technology and innovation, whilst moving with a rapidly changing and trend led market is key to Buzz Active’s continued success. It is important that the service can continue to thrive and maximise the opportunity for sustainability and growth. A different operating model could provide more scope for accessing other sources of funding and investment so that it can continue to grow and support the local community and wider county in the provision of outdoor adventure and water sport activities.

2.5 To support an options appraisal, the Council undertook a ‘test the market’ engagement event on 11 September 2024 to review potential levels of interest from external operators to operate the Buzz Active service. Attendees were asked their views on different delivery models, including the potential sale of Buzz Active as well as a concession contract model (i.e. where an external provider runs Buzz Active and takes on all the operating costs and risk in exchange for retaining any income derived from doing so).

2.6 The Council considers it may be more economically viable for alternative providers to run Buzz Active. This is because external providers may have more flexibility around pay and/or terms and conditions and support services relevant to Buzz Active (for example transport and catering infrastructure for the service provision), which the Council does not.

2.7 Due to the feedback from the initial ‘test the market’ event, and the level of interest from potentially viable operators, it is recommended that the Council explores further the option of selling or transferring Buzz Active to an alternative provider. This will involve a robust process where the Buzz Active service will be advertised for sale. It is anticipated that advertising the opportunity on the open market may generate further interest beyond those operators that attended the initial event in September.

2.8 The sale process will involve carefully reviewing the viability of interested providers as well as assessing their offer in terms of maintaining the current level of provision and meeting the aims and ethos of Buzz Active, which include:

- To provide inclusive land and water based provision to the community;
- To enable pricing to be as competitive as possible or offer alternatives to promote accessibility for all;
- To continue the Council’s Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) inclusive offers, including further growth in alternative provision style offers;
- To support the most vulnerable children and young people in the community (for example, by continuing to play a lead role in the government funded Holiday Activity and Fun (HAF) programmes or similar);
- To maintain a strong teaching base for water sports;
- To develop and grow workforce from within the community.

These aims were also shared at the initial ‘test the market’ event in September.

2.9 If the Lead Member agrees the recommendations set out in the report, the proposed timeline for next steps would be as follows:

- Early November 2024 - Launch Sale or Transfer of Entity Process;
- Early December 2024 - Review submissions and determine potential alternative provider;
- January – April/June 2025 – Agree terms of sale / transfer and work towards implementation and transition to a new provider.

### **3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 Given the financial pressures the Council is facing, it is necessary for departments to review all of their expenditure, especially spending on non-statutory services. The Buzz Active service, whilst non-statutory, makes a positive contribution to the residents of East Sussex and the Council has therefore explored ways to ensure the continuation of this valuable service in the future. It is considered that the best way to secure the ongoing provision of these outdoor activities is to explore different delivery models; and the Lead Member is therefore recommended to approve the proposal that the Council seeks an alternative provider to operate Buzz Active in the future.

3.2 Following feedback at the ‘test the market’ event in September, the route likely to be most effective in achieving this is considered to be through a sale or transfer of entity and the Lead Member is therefore recommended to agree that, provided a suitable alternative provider can be identified, this is the route the Council takes. This will enable the service to continue to grow and adapt appropriately to support the local community and wider county in the provision of outdoor adventure and water sport activities outside of the Council.

3.3 To facilitate this process, the Lead Member is recommended to delegate authority to the Director of Children’s Services to determine the most suitable third party to take over Buzz Active, agree the terms of any sale or transfer and to authorise the Council entering into such legal agreements as are necessary to give effect to the sale or transfer of Buzz Active. In addition, it is recommended that the Lead Member delegate authority to the Director of Children’s Services to carry out all other actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.

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