

## Blackwood Town Council

### Response to Consultation on the Proposed Closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre

November 2017

#### 1. Introduction & Recommendation

1.1 Blackwood Town Council has been asked to provide its views on Caerphilly County Borough Council's proposals to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre, demolish the facilities and profit by selling the land to private sector housing developers for the purposes of realising a one-off capital receipt payment.

We do so with a deep sense of concern.

1.2. Members are of the opinion that the Leisure Centre is a very popular community facility and as evidenced in the Cabinet report, is extremely well-used. More importantly members noted that the Centre is also one of the *lowest subsidised of all* leisure centres in the Borough, with the exciting potential to increase income streams and new business through new public and partner daytime usage following the closure of Pontllanfraith Comprehensive.

1.3. At a recent Special Meeting of Blackwood Town Council members were unanimous in their opposition to the proposed closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and that Caerphilly County Borough Council should continue to operate and maintain the Leisure Centre.

1.4. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that should the Cabinet, regrettably be *minded* to agree with their officers recommendations, then there is a third way the Cabinet *should agree to instead of closure*. This is discussed in further detail in sections 7.9 and 8.2 below.

#### 2. Links to National Strategy:

2.1. Members have grave concerns that the proposed closure and the way in which the proposal has been expedited, would in fact be contrary to the following Welsh Government Acts:

- Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014
- Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

#### 2.2. Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

This Act states that local councils have a duty to support vulnerable young adults in Group 3 by:

- Helping with a young adult's well-being

2.3. Providing access to community-based services (non-statutory or otherwise) that help to maintain or improve health and well-being and is within reasonable walking distance for those most vulnerable within society who *A. do not own a car or B. subsist on extremely low disposable income levels*, is an undeniably important role for a local authority and as such, access to affordable local leisure provision can help a young person immensely in managing their health and well-being and *for those reasons alone is vitally important*.

#### 2.4. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

This Act emphasises the importance of our communities being:

- Prosperous
- Resilient
- Healthier
- More equal
- Cohesive

2.5. Perhaps more importantly in the context of the proposed closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre, the Act talks about how public bodies like Caerphilly County Borough Council now have a duty to think about and publically state how they:

- Work together with others
- Involve people in making decisions

### 3. Analysis:

3.1. *Blackwood Town Council is of the view that the proposed closure conflicts with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in the following ways:*

#### 3.2. A Prosperous Community

The *Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation* evidences very low levels of income locally.

Pontllanfraith 2 is in the top 10% of the most deprived communities in Wales in terms of both the Household Income and Employment indicators (out of 1,909 communities) and as such provides a very strong argument for maintaining this local community facility.

#### 3.3. A Resilient Community

Pontllanfraith has recently seen the closure of the County's Civic Centre, the Caerphilly Music Services HQ, Pontllanfraith Comprehensive and now potentially it's Leisure Centre and surrounding public open spaces, all to housing development. The long-term cumulative effects of such a large-scale local authority service exodus is biting deep and its long-term consequences should not be underestimated.

Nor should the short-term goal of realising *capital receipts* be the determining factor in this decision as the Department's report principally campaigns for. *A tipping-point* where local resilience cannot realistically be maintained, will be reached should the Leisure Centre close.

#### 3.4 A Healthier Community

The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation also evidences high levels of poor health locally. Pontllanfraith 2 is in the top 25% of the most deprived communities in Wales in terms of poor health.

The closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre *will only serve to make this situation worse*, removing an established, well-used and popular centre of health and well-being in easy-walking distance to communities suffering from poverty and deprivation in the face of the values and expectations expressed in both of the Welsh Government Acts referenced above and the Caerphilly Public Service Board's emerging Plan.

#### 3.5 A More Equal Community

With a combined population of 17,048, the communities of Pontllanfraith and Blackwood represent a strategically important and significantly large population cluster around this Leisure Centre and this is demonstrated by the centre's usage data. Relocating (and reducing) provision outside of this large population cluster *will be detrimental to our most vulnerable residents*.

3.6. We reject the Department's assertion that Leisure Centre users will be easily able to travel to reduced provision elsewhere (the so-called 5x20 Rule). *Cabinet should note that the gulf in car ownership between the poorest and the most prosperous residents in Pontllanfraith who do not own a car is striking - 31% and 9% respectively.*

3.7. Therefore we believe that the proposed closure will *have its greatest impact on those who are the most vulnerable within our society* and who have no personal transport to mitigate the effects of costly, uncertain and time-limited public transport and the impossible to navigate on foot (at the distances expected) steep topography of our valley communities, whose road transport links are generally North/South as opposed to East/West and whose street designs and lighting is generally unsuitable for long-distance walking.

3.8. As mentioned above, there exists in both communities an extremely large variance in poverty and prosperity. Income levels in Pontllanfraith range from the top 10% most deprived in Wales to the top 4% most prosperous, the closure of the Leisure Centre will only serve to further widen this gap.

3.9. That is worth repeating; the loss of local provision *will not merely reduce* accessible and affordable community services to all, *but it will increase the poverty-gap* between our poorest and most prosperous residents.

3.10. This report also notes that *hundreds of skilled professional jobs have been relocated out of Pontllanfraith or lost through natural wastage* by the local authority through the closure of local authority buildings and services in Pontllanfraith over the last 18 months. (See 3.3 above and 3.11 below)

#### 3.11. A Cohesive Community

Communities lose their cohesion when local services *are no longer local*. The Civic Centre was a vitally important service access point for residents from both Blackwood and Pontllanfraith. The closure of the local comprehensive school was a hammer blow to parents, grandparents, the community and most importantly the pupils themselves who fought so gallantly to turn the school around and keep it open and who now have to travel out of Pontllanfraith for their education on diesel and petrol emitting vehicles daily.

3.12. However, Blackwood Town Council is of the view that should the Cabinet be unfortunately minded to agree with their officers recommendations, then we clearly state *there is a third way*. This is discussed in further detail in sections 7.9 and 8.2 below.

#### 4. A Healthier Wales – further analysis

4.1 Blackwood Town Council is of the view that should the closure proceed, there appears to be serious doubt whether the Islwyn High School facility could in fact have the capacity to take all existing users. Members also understand that the school has already entered into 'gentlemen's' agreements with clubs and teams currently not using Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and therefore existing users of the 3G facility in Pontllanfraith will have *nowhere to go*.

This in fact highlights the huge unmet demand for 3G provision currently within the Borough, provision which will be severely damaged should the 3G facility at Pontllanfraith be closed without replacement.

4.2. With communities in close proximity to the centre having a relatively low car ownership, as mentioned in 3.6. above (compared with more affluent areas), there are concerns that *current users* would be deterred from continuing a physically active lifestyle, due to the difficulties and costs of public transport in accessing the somewhat isolated new school site and other venues in the Borough.

4.3. Blackwood Town Council reiterates its opposition to the Cabinet report and the Department's assertion at consultation meetings that local people *can easily travel* to Cefn Fforest, Islwyn High, Heolddu and Newbridge, as this fails to take both our most deprived residents and the unforgiving valleys topography into account. Current Leisure Centre users without cars will simply be unable to access provision further afield.

4.4. This coupled with the loss of one of only two competition level 3G pitches in the Borough (funded and accredited by FAW) is a major *regional* concern. The current problems with facilities at the Centre of Sporting Excellence at Ystrad Mynachi and *no guarantee or timetable regarding funding* any proposed replacement at Blackwood Comprehensive seems a recipe for disaster, with numerous teams and hundreds of individuals likely to suffer, potentially lose income, membership and even league status in the interim. For them *the winding up of their clubs and activities is a very real operational risk*.

4.5. A Wales of Cohesive Communities – Blackwood Town Council recognises that the current facility is at the heart of the community, and already delivers a well-connected, socially diverse and engaged community hub. The Leisure Centre's closure, demolition and asset sale would decimate this.

4.6 A Globally Responsive Wales – the current high usage rates of the Centre is testament to the fact that the local community are already successfully attempting to lead a healthy, physically active lifestyle, and closure certainly would not guarantee the continuation of this but would, with the access problems already identified, likely lead to a significant reduction in community engagement in healthy living activities.

## 5. The Conflict with the Caerphilly Public Service Board's Draft Well-being Plan

5.1. Blackwood Town Council notes that Caerphilly County Borough Council is one of four statutory partners of the Caerphilly PSB and therefore notes *with particular concern* that this rushed proposal to close the Leisure Centre *is in direct conflict with* the following Caerphilly Public Service Board's emerging priorities:

### *The Caerphilly We Want Draft Well-being Plan:-*

- *Positive People - Empowering and enabling all our residents to achieve their own potential*
- *Positive Places - Enabling our communities to be resilient and sustainable*
- *Positive Change - A shared commitment to cross-sectoral change*

5.2. These shared commitments *must be more than words* on a strategic partner document and *Blackwood Town Council as your optical friend and local authority partner*, calls for these principles (detailed further under section 9. below) to be adhered to and enacted when considering the future of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre.

5.3. However, one priority above all is worth detailing here:

- To support our most disadvantaged communities to be resilient, cohesive and enable them to help themselves

## 6. The Financial Argument

6.1. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that *the financial implications in the Cabinet report are somewhat confusing and incomplete*. Members rightly point out that the Borough took the decision only last month to spend over £3million for demolition of the former much loved Islwyn Civic Centre and the schools at Pontllanfraith (which included the CCBC Music Service headquarters) and Oakdale.

Now to propose an additional £325,000 to demolish the Leisure Centre *rather than spend* £262,000 on Operational Costs & Maintenance Backlog Costs to keep the Leisure Centre as a thriving hub of the community is we believe a curious and strategically ill-considered move in such a short timescale.

6.2. Blackwood Town Council also queries the financial competency of proposing to spend £500,000 on a new 3G Pitch (if monies can be found) rather than reinvest an additional £200,000 in 2020-2022 to retain the currently FAW endorsed pitch at Pontllanfraith.

6.3. Blackwood Town Council is gravely concerned that the County's planned maintenance and asset replacement policy at the Leisure Centre has been somewhat absent from the usual expectations of managerial financial planning for some years now if these maintenance liabilities are only now coming to light and indeed appear to be costs highlighted for *the future* as opposed to a statement of on-going prudent financial year-on-year budgeting.

## 7. Under "Reasons for the Recommendations" of the original Cabinet report

### 7.1. Cabinet Report Recommendation '11.1'

7.2. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that the closure proposal appears to be entirely based on the need to realise the full capital receipt potential *rather* than the health and well-being needs of the local community and members are eager to know what the Caerphilly Public Services Board's view on these proposals are as they are in direct conflict with the majority of the PSB's emerging draft priorities.

As such we will be writing to the Caerphilly Public Service Board separately to ask them to examine any decision to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and how it may conflict against their emerging priorities.

Additionally, we will be writing to the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales to seek her comments on the Departments report and our concerns as expressed in this consultation response and of course to ask her to undertake a review to examine any decision to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre in the context of the *Well-being of Future Generations Act*.

7.3. Cabinet Report Recommendation '11.2'

7.4. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that to allow for the smooth transition of current users to Islwyn High School without a loss of service is wishful thinking at best and naïve ill-considered guesswork at worst – some very serious questions remain unanswered, how can this be so when the 3G Pitch at the school cannot accommodate any more users than have already been agreed to date and that there is *no guarantee of a replacement 3G pitch at Blackwood Comprehensive any time soon.*

7.5. Cabinet Report Recommendation '11.3'

7.6. The Caerphilly Adventures Outdoor Education Service has survived *and thrived* at the existing site, members ask, why wasn't Cwmcaron considered when they moved from Ynys Hywel initially and why should what seems a *profitable* service not continue on site and assist the Centre's overall prosperity?

7.7. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that *the timing of this report is as a direct result of the need for a speedy decision linked to the demolition of the Civic Centre & School Sites, to the detriment it seems of all else, especially the local community.*

7.8. The report states the emerging Sport & Leisure Services strategy, whilst not fully adopted, does not recognise Pontllanfraith as a potential Leisure Centre.

7.9. That being said, Blackwood Town Council is of the view that any decision on closure *should be seen* in the context of the overall County Borough Strategy *once* agreed by Council and the ability (and responsibility) *to actively engage and empower the local community towards possible asset transfer and community ownership options* and not as a convenient opportunity to asset-strip through demolition and land-sale a successful Leisure Centre with the apparent primary objective of maximising capital receipts.

8. It is therefore recommended by Blackwood Town Council that:

8.1. Caerphilly County Borough Council Continue to Maintain and Operate the Leisure Centre in Pontllanfraith.

8.2. However, under the already agreed principals of "*Building Resilient Communities*" and "*Positive Places – Enabling our communities to be resilient and sustainable*", if Cabinet members vote to close the Leisure Centre, Blackwood Town Council *as a statutory partner of the County Borough* formerly requests that the decision Cabinet makes would be to *defer closure to enable* a six to twelve month grace period to enable discussions to take place with:

- The local Community
- Leisure Centre users and groups
- Partners and other stakeholders

8.3. To explore the potential Asset Transfer of the Leisure Centre to community ownership and to enable all interested parties as described above to develop the most appropriate legal charitable operational model and to explore additional funding routes to ensure such a transfer of assets takes place.

8.4. Blackwood Town Council to formally write to the Caerphilly Public Service Board to request that the Board examine any decision to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre that does not also allow for the investigation of asset transfer and community ownership of the Leisure Centre and how such a decision to close may conflict with the Public Service Board's emerging priorities.

8.5. Blackwood Town Council to formally write to the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales to seek her comments on the Department's report and our concerns as expressed in this consultation response and to request that The Commissioner undertake a review (see powers at Appendix A) to examine any decision to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre that does not also allow for the timely and thorough investigation of asset transfer and community ownership of the Leisure Centre and how such a decision to close may conflict with the principals and expectations as laid down in the *& Well-being of Future Generations Act*.

## 9. Reasons for Blackwood Town Council's Recommendations:

9.1. To enable Caerphilly County Borough Council to work in partnership with the local community and others to discharge its commitments and ambitions in accordance with the following National, regional and local strategic objectives:-

- The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014
- The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
- The Caerphilly Public Service Boards:-

### *The Caerphilly We Want - Draft Well-being Plan:-*

#### *Positive Change - A shared commitment to cross-sectoral change*

- Provide leadership to facilitate organisational culture change, and shift to new ways of working, aligning corporate priorities in accordance with the Sustainable Development Principle
- Use our assets and resources more intelligently and sustainably
- Support our residents and partners to contribute fully to the Caerphilly we all want

#### *Positive People - Empowering and enabling all our residents to achieve their own potential*

- Facilitate a shift towards collaborative working with an emphasis on prevention to address current and future health and well-being challenges.
- Develop a co-ordinated programme of volunteering, maximising it as a route to personal well-being and employment.
- Equip our residents to manage their physical and mental health and well-being needs in partnership with services

#### *Positive Places - Enabling our communities to be resilient and sustainable*

- Support our most disadvantaged communities to be resilient, cohesive and enable them to help themselves
- Work with regional partners to create safe, confident communities and promote community cohesion.
- Increase the contribution that the environment makes to the health and well-being of our residents.

9.2. Blackwood Town Council is of the view that the Cabinet allow for reflection on both Acts and on the emerging priorities of the Caerphilly Public Service Board, whose joint partnership approach of all public sector organisations *supports the rights of local communities to develop local solutions to local challenges, which includes local service delivery and ownership of community assets.*

End of report.

#### Circulation List:

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