



## **SPECIAL CABINET – 20<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2024**

**SUBJECT: PONTLLANFRAITH LEISURE CENTRE**

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To advise Cabinet on the outcome of a public consultation on a proposal for the indoor facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre to remain permanently closed, with sporting facilities at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL) including a 4-court sports hall, changing facilities, and a 3G pitch being made available for community use outside of school hours upon opening in Spring 2025. The proposal would also see use of the 3G pitch on the Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre site continue, but cease once the 3G pitch at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.
- 1.2 To seek Cabinet approval for the indoor facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre to remain permanently closed and for use of the 3G pitch on the Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre site to continue but cease once the 3G pitch at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.

### **2. SUMMARY**

- 2.1 In 2019, the Council adopted a Sport and Active Recreation Strategy for the period 2019-2029. The vision for sport and active recreation is “to encourage healthy lifestyles and support our residents to be “more active, more often”. The strategy references poor levels of health in certain areas of the county; reducing budgets; the large number of ageing facilities across the county and the deteriorating quality of our older buildings as well as increasing population and consumer demand as some of the key challenges it is seeking to overcome. The strategy also references the need to maximise the impact of all sport and recreation facilities.
- 2.2 Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is now nearly 50 years old. The building has a significant maintenance backlog, and the associated 3G football pitch is at the end of its lifespan. The indoor leisure facilities closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020 and, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, have not re-opened for leisure use. The budget for running Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch is £179,360 per year.
- 2.3 The Leisure Centre formerly operated as a shared joint - use site with the adjacent Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School which closed in 2016. The school buildings are

currently being demolished ahead of the construction under the Council's Sustainable Communities for Learning programme of a Centre for Vulnerable Learners. Due for completion in Spring 2025 the new Centre will include a 4-court sports hall, with associated changing facilities and a 3G pitch (size 40 x 30 metres i.e. not full size) available for community use outside of school hours. Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners are included at Appendix 1.

- 2.4 Islwyn High School opened in June 2017 to replace the existing Pontllanfraith and Oakdale Comprehensive Schools and includes a 4-court sports hall, a dual use 3G football and rugby pitch, and tennis courts. A new dual use 3G pitch opened at Blackwood Comprehensive School in 2020. In 2021 the existing Artificial Turf Pitches (ATP) at both Lewis School, Pengam and Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys was upgraded to dual use 3G pitches and support community use. The Council is continuing to look at further developing the 3G pitch provision in the county borough.
- 2.5 Closing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and the associated 3G pitch permanently is consistent with the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy and the Mobilising Team Caerphilly principal of doing things differently. The case for closure is made in view of the need to invest significantly in the existing facilities to sustain their use, let alone bring them up to current standards, when there will shortly be new, alternate, and modern facilities available on the adjacent site and nearby. Additionally, these modern alternate facilities can be operated far more efficiently than the existing Leisure Centre as they are located on joint use sites with schools.
- 2.6 On 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023 Cabinet unanimously approved a consultation exercise regarding the proposal that the indoor facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remain closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch continues, but ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The outcome of the consultation exercise is included within this report. The Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre report was considered by the Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024 and their comments are detailed in 10.6 below.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 That Cabinet consider the outcome of the consultation exercise and the comments of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee at 10.6 below.
- 3.2 That Cabinet approves the permanent closure of the indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre.
- 3.3 That Cabinet approves the permanent closure of the 3G pitch on the Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre site once the 3G pitch at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.in a future report to Cabinet

### **4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 To support the agreed Outcomes in the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy of:
  - Better Health
  - Healthier and Prosperous Communities
  - Securing a more efficient and financially sustainable future offer

## 5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 In 2019, the Council adopted a Sport and Active Recreation Strategy (SARS) for the period 2019-2029. The Vision for sport and active recreation is “to encourage healthy lifestyles and support our residents to be “more active, more often”. The implementation of the Strategy encompasses a range of activity which supports the new Corporate Plan and in particular Well-being Objective 3 - Enabling our communities to be Inclusive as well as the Council’s broader Placeshaping plans.
- 5.2 The Strategy references poor levels of health in certain areas of the county; reducing budgets; the large number of ageing facilities across the county and the deteriorating quality of our older buildings as well as increasing population and consumer demand as some of the key challenges it is seeking to overcome. The strategy also references the need to maximise the impact of all sport and recreation facilities.
- 5.3 Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre opened in 1975 and its facilities include a five-court sports hall, two squash courts, small fitness suite, small multi-purpose dance studio and a 3G football pitch.
- 5.4 Now nearly 50 years old, Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre has a maintenance backlog estimated at £475,159 based on a condition survey undertaken in 2019. The 3G football pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was installed in 2011. The typical lifespan of a surface of this nature is 8 – 12 years depending upon use. In 2018/19 the last full operating year before the Covid-19 pandemic, the leisure centre site cost the Council £131,350 to operate. In that period there were 79,923 visits as shown in the table below

AREA	ADULT	JUNIOR	TOTAL
3G Pitch	25,900	24,184	50,084
Fitness Suite	6,729	1,361	8,090
Squash Courts	1,060	56	1,116
Holiday Camps	0	490	490
Sports Hall	10,633	5,137	15,770
Group Exercise	4,373	0	4,373
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48,695</b>	<b>31,228</b>	<b>79,923</b>

- 5.5 On 10th April 2019 Cabinet resolved to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and on 24th June 2019 the High Court quashed that decision. There were 5 grounds of the Judicial Review and the Court dismissed 4, but did rule that there was insufficient evidence that Cabinet had properly discharged its duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. An Integrated Impact Assessment for this proposal has been undertaken, including full consideration of socio-economic duty as highlighted at Section 7. below.
- 5.6 The indoor leisure space at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020 and, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, has not re-opened for leisure use. Between September

2021 and June 2023, it was used by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board as a Mass Vaccination Centre to replace Newbridge Leisure Centre. All previous block bookings of the indoor sport and leisure space have relocated to other facilities across the county borough such as Oakdale Badminton Club at Islwyn High School for example.

- 5.7 The Leisure Centre formerly operated as a shared joint-use site with the adjacent Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School which closed in 2016. Under the Sustainable Communities for Learning programme the Council is developing a Centre for Vulnerable Learners on the former school site. Due for completion in Spring 2025 the new facility will accommodate between 80 - 120 pupils and will be equipped with high quality learning opportunities, indoor and outdoor sporting provision as well as access to first class support and will enable community use of the facilities outside of school hours. Demolition of the surplus school buildings is currently in progress. Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners are included at Appendix 1.
- 5.8 Sporting facilities at the Centre for Vulnerable Learners will include a 4-court sports hall, with changing facilities, and a 3G pitch (size 40 x 30 metres i.e. not full size). The sports hall will have a minimum ceiling height clear of any obstructions of 7.5 metres accommodating at least the Club Standard for Badminton Basketball Netball and Volleyball in accordance with Sport England guidance. Parking spaces and EV charging points will be available to the public outside of school times. There will be a Joint User agreement between Sport & Leisure Services and the Centre for Vulnerable Learners, with the out of hours usage of the facilities managed by Sport & Leisure ensuring appropriate community use. The new 3G will support training provision but not competitive fixtures. The vast majority of competitive fixtures are undertaken at weekends, and these can be played at Islwyn High, or Blackwood Comprehensive school.
- 5.9 The existing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre sports hall is x 5-court (so a reduction of 1 court). The majority of sports halls across the county borough are x 4 courts. The sizes of both facilities are set out below:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre Sports Hall (5 Court)</b>	<b>CVL Sports Hall (4 Court)</b>
Overall Width	17912mm	18250mm
Overall Length	36000mm	34730mm
Wall to Badminton Court Baseline	2260mm / 2300mm	2425mm / 2425mm
Between Parallel Badminton Courts	Varies (Min being 750mm)	2000mm
Wall from Side-line of Badminton Court	Varies (Approx. 1000mm)	2165mm

In summary, the CVL is marginally wider, but slightly shorter than the existing sports hall at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre, however this is negligible given the move from a 5 to 4 badminton courts hall.

- 5.10 The CVL will not include a fitness suite, squash courts or dance studio, but there has been significant investment in the Fitness Suite at Newbridge Leisure Centre along with a smaller but targeted investment at Heolddu Leisure Centre in both the Fitness

Suite and Squash Court, there is also a Fitness Suite at Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre. The Sports Hall in the CVL is multi-purpose and as such can accommodate aspects of provision that the Dance Studio previously offered and provided. Also a new Dance and Group Cycling Studio were provided as part of the Newbridge Leisure Centre Fitness Suite project and is supported by an expanded programme of activity. It should also be noted that there are a number of private sector fitness suite providers within the local area offering a variety of options.

- 5.11 Use of the outdoor 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre recommenced on a phased basis in April 2021 without access to the changing rooms, supported by the Sport and Leisure Covid 19 re-opening plan. The full size 3G pitch is well used and in 2022/23, there were 30,257 visits as shown in the table below:

<b>AREA</b>	<b>ADULT</b>	<b>JUNIOR</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
3G Pitch Hire	10,913	19,344	30,257

- 5.12 The 3G pitch has been the subject of ongoing repairs for some time. An inspection report produced in 2022 confirmed that the condition of the pitch is as to be expected given its age and intense usage (particularly the usage level when the former Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School was open) and that it is nearing the end of its lifespan. Any further repairs undertaken would only provide a short-term benefit and replacement must be considered. Replacement costs are approximately £280,000, although this does not include a review of the current 30 year old substructure that will require investigation to ensure that the integrity has not been compromised.
- 5.13 Islwyn High School is 3 miles away and opened in June 2017 to replace the existing Pontllanfraith and Oakdale Comprehensive Schools and includes a dual use 3G football and rugby pitch and 4-court Sports Hall and tennis courts. A dual use 3G pitch was also installed at Blackwood Comprehensive School and opened for use in 2020. In contrast to the single use, football only, 3G pitch provision at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre the 3G pitches at Blackwood Comprehensive School and Islwyn High School are capable of being used for both football and rugby (with resultant Football Association of Wales and International Rugby Board approval).
- 5.14 The current 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is one of the few pitches that meets the current standard for Gwent County matches. The 3G pitches at Islwyn High School and Blackwood Comprehensive School do not currently meet that standard. However, Welsh League Reserve fixtures have been played at the Blackwood Comprehensive School 3G pitch this season along with FAW Academy fixtures over the past year. The county borough has six Gwent County level teams, and all of these teams play at their own local facility and have not expressed a desire to make any 3G their 'permanent' home. Should these teams aim to move through the FAW league tiers then the options to support them in this would be discussed and explored.
- 5.15 It should also be noted that recent investment has taken place at both Lewis School, Pengam and Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys in relation to upgrading the existing Artificial Turf Pitches (ATP) to dual use Rugby & Football 3G pitches. The allocation of bookings at these facilities is undertaken in collaboration with the host school and Sport & Leisure Services. The sport and community facilities at both Islwyn High and Blackwood Comprehensive School are delivering full community programmes and in December 2023 the management of the 3G pitch and sports hall at Islwyn High school was transferred to Sport and Leisure Services and is now available for weekend and evening bookings. In a further improvement to existing facilities the 3G pitch at Newbridge Leisure Centre is in the process of being renewed.

The Council is also continuing to look at developing further the 3G pitch provision in the county borough.

- 5.16 With the existing significant 3G provision and following the opening of the CVL it will be possible to accommodate all current 3G pitch bookings at alternative facilities if use of the 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith were to cease. Whilst the Sport and Leisure service would use best endeavours to meet the requests of users it is not possible to guarantee that all bookings could be transferred on a like for like basis in terms of time and day of the week. It should also be noted that the existing 3G pitch operates until 22:00 hours in the week and the CVL has a condition of planning consent permitting use of the 3G pitch until 21:00 hours. There are currently 2 bookings on the existing 3G pitch at 21:00 hours.
- 5.17 Closing the leisure facilities and 3G pitch would render the site surplus to requirements.
- 5.18 On 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023 Cabinet unanimously approved a consultation exercise regarding the proposal that the indoor facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch continues, but ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The purpose of the consultation was to gain an understanding of the impact of the proposal on key stakeholders including previous and current users of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch and to understand any identified negative impacts.
- 5.19 The consultation period ran from Monday 20 November 2023 to Wednesday 3 January 2024 and was widely promoted including targeted stakeholder groups (including current users of the 3G provision/local sports clubs). Residents were encouraged to give their views in a variety of ways including online and hard copy surveys and online/face to face drop-in sessions. 307 completed surveys were received by the closing date and 16 individual members of the public in total proactively attended the online/face to face drop-in sessions to discuss the proposal.
- 5.20 By far, the largest group of people to respond to the survey were previous users of the leisure centre and local residents. 79% said they were previous users of either the leisure centre or 3G pitch. The largest number of users visited the site "weekly" during this time and the main mode of transport to the site was car (75% used their car and 23% walked).
- 5.21 35% of previous users have used another CCBC leisure centre or sports facility while the centre in Pontllanfraith has remained closed. 21% have used another privately run leisure facility. 31% have not accessed sport and leisure facilities during this time - distance to alternative facilities (not being able to walk to alternative sites) was the main reason given. Other facilities not suitable to personal needs and a preference to use Pontllanfraith along with capacity at other facilities were also reasons. 130 respondents to the survey are current users of the 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith. 67% visit the site weekly, 20% visiting a few times a week. The main mode of transport to the site was the car. 25 people said that they currently walk to the site. 98 use a car.
- 5.22 74% of respondents to the survey felt the proposal would have a negative impact, 26% felt that the impact would be neutral or positive. Reasons given for neutral or positive impact were that other facilities within CCBC would allow residents from any area a choice, are of a better quality/more modern (including CVL); Exercise outdoors so not reliant on the facility; the centre has been closed for some time, welcome a new facility
- 5.23 The main reasons given for feeling that the closure will have a negative impact were:

- Distance to alternative provision (beyond the CVL), increase travel distance, time and costs/ other sites are not on public transport routes.
- Too few sport and recreation facilities generally across the borough to meet current demand and growing population. fewer facilities will have a negative impact on health and well-being
- Lack of availability of facilities during the day
- Shortage of 3Gs at weekends and in the winter
- Size of the new 3G pitch for competitive matches and capacity at alternative sites
- Questions over suitability of CVL sports hall for badminton and other sports, noted the lack of gym.

5.24 The majority of respondents live within a 5 or 10 minute drive from the current site but some users of the existing site travel from further afield and a number of other 3G sports pitches also fall within 10 minute drive from the current site.

5.25 A number of older respondents to the survey, some respondents with children, as well as those with disabilities, felt that they would be more negatively affected due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. Comments were also raised that women's sports may be impacted more if there is a limited capacity to book facilities, and that the CVL site needs to be accessible for those with disabilities.

5.26 In terms of mitigation of the impacts identified, some respondents commented that the site should simply be kept open. Suggested mitigation included:

- Consider the difficulties and cost associated with travel to other sites
- Ensure alternative provision locally: classes and opportunities to use the hall at the new CVL site
- Temporarily open the existing site until the alternative is available
- Replace the current 3G pitch (with like for like) in the local area
- To meet demand:
  - ensure that 3G pitches across the borough are made available at weekends and during school holidays.
  - build more 3G pitches on current grass pitches that currently don't get enough use due to poor weather.
  - change the allocations system to ensure grass roots teams can access pitches
  - ensure that those using the current pitch are allocated other provision

5.27 Some respondents to the consultation commented they felt there would be a negative impact due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. The 23% of respondents who said that they walk to the existing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre will have the opportunity to make use of new facilities at the CVL outside of school hours. 75% responded that they travel by car to use the

existing facilities and the majority of respondents live within a 5 or 10 minute drive from the current site, but some users of the existing site travel from further afield. As illustrated in 5.33 there are a number of alternative facilities within 10 minutes' drive of the existing site.

- 5.28 The ability to book alternative facilities such as the new 3G pitch and sports hall at the CVL will serve to mitigate some of the impacts identified by respondents in relation to capacity. In addition, current bookings at Pontllanfraith will be supported to transfer to alternative facilities with capacity being increased further with the management of the 3G and sports hall at Islwyn High school having been taken over by Sport and Leisure Services in December 2023 and is now fully available for weekend and evening bookings.

## Conclusion

- 5.29 The indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre closed as result of the UK National lockdown in March 2020 and, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, has not re-opened for leisure use since, with previous block bookings being relocated to other facilities across the county borough. The existing leisure centre has significant outstanding maintenance liabilities, is not energy efficient, is not DDA compliant and does not meet the aspirations set out in the Sport & Active Recreation Strategy 2019 – 29 of providing modern, fit for purpose leisure facilities.
- 5.30 The 3G football pitch is coming to the end of its lifespan and requires regular and ongoing repairs to ensure it remains safe for community use. The cost to replace the facility is estimated at approximately £280,000.
- 5.31 The Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL) development provides an option to replace the majority of facilities within the existing leisure centre with a modern, fit for purpose offer that will also the help the Council meet its ambition in relation to carbon reduction.
- 5.32 The CVL will also offer a 3G facility, however it is acknowledged that the new offer will be smaller and only suitable for training purposes and not competitive matches. Most competitive matches are played on weekends, and as such can be relocated to Islwyn High or Blackwood Comprehensive School.
- 5.33 74% of respondents to the public consultation felt the proposal would have a negative impact. The negative impacts identified principally centred around increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities and concerns around the capacity and availability of those alternative facilities. Those impacts are mitigated by the provision of new facilities at the CVL and the availability of a range of alternative facilities a short distance away:

Facility	Distance from Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre	Travel Time by Car from Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre
Newbridge Leisure Centre	3.3 miles	9 minutes
Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre	2.0 miles	8 minutes
Sue Noake Leisure Centre, Ystrad	3.1 miles	9 minutes



Mynach		
Heolddu Leisure Centre	5 miles	14 minutes
Islwyn High School	3.1 miles	7 minutes
Blackwood Comprehensive School	2.3 miles	8 minutes
Caerphilly Leisure Centre	7.5 miles	16 minutes
Markham Community Leisure Centre	4.2 miles	10 minutes
Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys	2.2 miles	5 minutes
Lewis School, Pengam	3.1 miles	9 minutes

- 5.34 Closing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and the associated 3G pitch permanently is consistent with the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy and the Mobilising Team Caerphilly principal of doing things differently. The case for closure is made in view of the need to invest significantly in the existing facilities to sustain their use let alone bring them up to current standards when there will shortly be new, alternate, and modern facilities available on the adjacent site and nearby. Additionally, these modern alternate facilities can be operated far more efficiently than the existing offer as they are located on joint use sites with schools. These proposals support the new Corporate Plan and the Council's Placeshaping plans.

## 6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 As indicated in the report, a number of the financial figures are estimates. The completion and opening date for the Centre for Vulnerable Learners is based on current project projections.

## 7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 Feedback from the consultation exercise has been used to further develop the Integrated Impact Assessment undertaken. Older people and those with children as well as those with disabilities felt that they would be more negatively affected due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. 75% of respondents drive to the existing leisure centre and there are a range of alternatives within 10 minutes' drive of the site. The provision of a new sports hall and 3G pitch at the adjacent CVL offers further mitigation.
- 7.2 There was also concern that women's sports may be impacted more if there is a limited capacity to book facilities. As detailed in this report, there will be significant alternative provision with the completion of the CVL and availability of other facilities nearby. It was also stated that the CVL site needs to be accessible for those with disabilities and the new facility is being designed and built in accordance with modern accessibility standards. The existing Leisure Centre is not.

**Link to IIA**

## **8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The budget for running Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch is £179,360 per year. It became more expensive to run following closure of the adjacent secondary school in 2016 with the ending of a joint user virement of circa £26,000 from Education (as a result of the Leisure Centre previously being classed as a joint use centre located on a school site) following closure of the school. Also, a new rating valuation following the school closure resulted in an increase in non-domestic rates of £17,000.
- 8.2 As detailed above, there is a maintenance backlog estimated at £475,159, based on a condition survey undertaken in 2019. The 5 year old survey identified repair or replacement works to multiple elements of the building including the roof, walls, cladding, windows, doors, ceilings and electrics. The 3G football pitch was installed in 2011 and is at the end of its lifespan and replacement costs are approximately £280,000 – although this does not include a review of the current 30 year old substructure that will require investigation. Some consideration may also need to be given to changing room provision if the 3G pitch facility were to be retained.
- 8.3 As stated above, apart from very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, the indoor sport and leisure space has not been in use since the national lockdown in 2020 and has for a significant period been utilised as the county borough's Mass Vaccination Centre. The majority of equipment in the Fitness Suite has either been relocated to other leisure centres or taken out of use to support ongoing maintenance and repairs across the other leisure centres. This would need to be purchased at a cost of approximately £60,000 - £80,000.
- 8.4 The likely savings between operating the CVL facilities in comparison to running the leisure centre will be determined upon developing the delivery model and clarifying the scope of public interest and the range of opening. Energy cost considerations are difficult to determine at this moment in time. It is proposed that there will be an agreement between Sport & Leisure and the CVL (Education) to reimburse the school for out of school hours usage with the facilities managed by Sport & Leisure – this will be covered by a Joint User agreement that sets out agreed areas of responsibility in support of ensuring appropriate community use.
- 8.5 In summary, whilst the annual revenue costs of operating facilities for community use at the CVL are not known currently they will be significantly less than the current annual budget for Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre of £179,360. New equipment would be required to reopen the Fitness Suite at a cost of approximately £60,000 - £80,000. Replacement costs for the existing 3G pitch which is at the end of its life are at least £280,000. In addition, the existing leisure centre has a maintenance backlog estimated at £475,159 in 2019.
- 8.6 Closing the leisure facilities and 3G pitch would render the site surplus to requirements. Any potential capital receipt for the sale of the leisure centre and 3G pitch area would be dependent on a number of variables.

## **9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Any closure of the leisure centre will be progressed in accordance with relevant HR policies and in consultation with staff and Trade Unions as appropriate. The 3 staff based at the site have been working in support of the Mass Vaccination Centre along

with a secondment to the Sport & Leisure Customer Services Team. The staff member who supported the Contact Tracing Team has been reallocated to Cefn Forest Leisure Centre to support an existing vacancy. It is clear that the delivery of community based facilities from the Centre for Vulnerable Learners will require a dedicated and experienced staff resource and on that basis utilising the existing staffing would be advisable and support consistent and safe delivery practice.

## **10. CONSULTATIONS**

- 10.1 The consultees listed below have been consulted on this report and their views have been incorporated accordingly.
- 10.2 Following Cabinet approval on 15th November 2023 a public consultation regarding the proposal that the indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch continues, but ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The purpose of the consultation was to gain an understanding of:
- the impact of the proposal on key stakeholders including previous and current users of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch.
  - Where respondents identify a negative impact of the proposal, to understand their reasons and to identify mitigation to reduce that impact.
- 10.3 The consultation period ran from Monday 20 November 2023 to Wednesday 3 January 2024 and was widely promoted including targeted stakeholder groups (current users of the 3G provision/local sports clubs). Residents were encouraged to give their views in a variety of ways:
- Survey – online, hard copies available
  - Face to face engagement – 4 drop in sessions held within the Pontllanfraith ward plus 2 online sessions
- 10.4 307 completed surveys were received by the closing date, and 16 individuals in total proactively attended the online/face-to-face drop in sessions to discuss the proposal in further detail. The full consultation report on is included at Appendix 2.
- 10.5 On 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023, the Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee received a report which sought its views as part of the consultation exercise. During the meeting the Scrutiny Committee decided not to provide its views and requested a future report on the outcome of the consultation once the consultation period had expired.
- 10.6 The Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre report was considered by the Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024.

One Member asked about consultation on the requirements of sports clubs playing at the higher tiers at set times over weekends. The 3G pitches at Islwyn High School and Blackwood Comprehensive School do not currently meet the standard for Gwent County matches. The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager gave assurances on the consultation with sports clubs and advised that weekend access at Islwyn High School would provide greater capacity for some of the higher tier matches.

A Member highlighted the 31% of previous users of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre that responded to the consultation who have not accessed sport and leisure facilities since the centre closed. The Member expressed the view that people with families and older

members of the community were discriminated against as alternative provision focussed on the evening which was a period when many people preferred to remain at home. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services advised Members that alternative rather than identical provision of services was proposed in the report. It was also highlighted that these alternatives were a short distance from the Leisure Centre site and that the consultation showed that 75% of previous users that responded to the consultation indicated that they had used their car to get to the leisure facility.

One Member queried if the temporary closure of the Newbridge 3G pitch, along with the permanent closure of the one in Pontllanfraith, would have an impact on the offer of suitable surfaces across the County Borough. The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager gave assurances on the availability of 3G pitches at the Centre for Vulnerable Learners and Islwyn High School and also pointed out that the closure of the pitch at Newbridge for upgrading was for a very short period of time to support an upgrade to the existing facility. Members also heard that many teams currently book half not full pitches for training purposes.

A Member questioned the assertion in the report that the indoor leisure space at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020. The Member believed it was closed in August 2021 prior to being used as a mass vaccination centre. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services advised that the centre closed as a result of lock-down requirements and to the best of his knowledge the centre did not reopen after lockdown measures were lifted. The Chair asked for officers to clarify the date of closure.

The Member also sought clarity on why the Leisure Centre did not reopen to the public after its use as a mass vaccination centre by the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services gave details of the investment that would be needed to bring the centre back into public use, such as refurbishment of the sports hall floor. The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager advised Members that only a small number of calls had been received enquiring about when the Leisure Centre would be reopening. The Member commented that users did not call the centre as they knew it was closed. The Member also suggested that a breakdown of the maintenance backlog estimated at £475,159 would be useful. He also questioned if it was essential to refurbish the sports hall floor.

The Member raised the issue of block bookings and observed that Blackwood Netball had questioned the suitability of alternative facilities at Markham Leisure Centre. The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager advised that he had discussed with representatives from Blackwood Netball concerns over heating issues and were given reassurances about the provision of facilities in the future.

One Member questioned the assertion in 5.28 that current bookings at Pontllanfraith will be supported to transfer to alternative facilities such as the 3G pitch and sports hall in Islwyn High School which are now available for evening and weekend bookings. The Member observed that this was not happening as clubs were having to email the school and then waiting a few days for a reply. The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager clarified that weekend bookings were currently being taken by Newbridge Leisure Centre and advised that there had been full weekend use of the 3G pitch by local clubs since Sport and Leisure Services took over weekend booking arrangements for Islwyn High. He also stated that additional communication would be provided to ensure that users knew who to contact to book the alternative indoor facilities on weekends.

One Member sought clarity on the booking process for facilities at Islwyn High School.

The Sports & Leisure Facilities Manager provided information on the process and advised that bookings had been for the outside space at the High School and were taken by staff at Newbridge Leisure Centre. The Member asked why the Pontllanfraith centre was closed before the Centre for Vulnerable Learners was operational, given that the facilities at this new location were a replacement for the ones under discussion in the report. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services reiterated to Members the financial reasons why it was proposed that the centre is not reopened for public use. The Member raised concerns over the suitability of the new 3G pitch proposed at the CVL. Following further clarification on the financial considerations associated with this matter the Corporate Director for Economy and the Environment reminded Members of the £50M+ savings required by the Council over the coming couple of years and that this report should be considered against that savings requirement backdrop.. The Member finished by suggesting that the potential asset transfer of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre should be fully explored.

## 11. STATUTORY POWER

### 11.1 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976

Author: Robert Hartshorn, Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services

#### Consultees:

Councillor Chris Morgan, Cabinet Member for Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces  
Councillor Andrew Whitcombe, Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor Shane Williams, Vice Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor Mike Adams, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Councillor Patricia Cook, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Councillor Colin Gordon, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Dave Street, Deputy Chief Executive  
Mark S Williams, Corporate Director for Economy and Environment  
Jeff Reynolds, Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager  
Jared Lougher, Sport and Leisure Development Manager  
Sue Richards, Head of Transformation, Education Planning and Strategy  
Andrea West, Sustainable Communities for Learning Manager  
Robert Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer  
Lynne Donovan, Head of People Services  
David Roberts, Interim Finance Manager  
Stephen Harris, Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer  
Rhian Kyte, Head of Regeneration and Planning  
Ben Winstanley, Head of Land and Property  
Hayley Lancaster, Transformation Manager – Engagement  
Liz Sharma, Service Improvements and Partnerships

#### Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners
- Appendix 2: Consultation Report

#### Background Papers:

- **Report to Cabinet 20th September 2017 – “Proposals to commence a consultation exercise to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting.**
- **Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 1st November 2017 – “Consultation with respect to the closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and**

relevant minute of meeting

- Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 12th December 2017 – “Outcome of consultation on the potential closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Cabinet 13th December 2017 – “The future of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 18th January 2018 – “Consideration of call-in request – Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Cabinet 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre – Consideration of the call-in in the context of the leisure review” and relevant minute of meeting.
- Report to Cabinet 14<sup>th</sup> November 2018 – “Draft Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019-29” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.
- Report to Cabinet 10th April 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.
- Report to Cabinet 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and Link to meeting and relevant Minute.
- Report to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute
- Report to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee 13th February 2024 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre”