



HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 12TH DECEMBER 2023

SUBJECT: PONTLLANFRAITH LEISURE CENTRE

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

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee's views on a proposal for Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre to remain permanently closed, with sporting facilities at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL) including a 4-court sports hall, with associated 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 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 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 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 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 and dual use 3G football and rugby pitch. 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 were upgraded to dual use 3G pitches and support community use. The Council is continuing to look at developing 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 are 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 15th November 2023 Cabinet unanimously approved a consultation exercise regarding the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The views of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee are sought as part of that consultation exercise.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee provide views on the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The views of Scrutiny Committee will be included in a further report to Cabinet on the outcome of the consultation exercise.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To ensure that the views of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee are included within the consultation exercise.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 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 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 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
TOTAL	48,695	31,228	79,923

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 closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020 and 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 site with the adjacent Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School which closed in 2017. 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 school hours. Demolition of 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 associated 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. 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 - although 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:

Element	Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre Sports Hall (5 Court)	CVL Sports Hall (4 Court)
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 x 5 to x 4 number 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.
- 5.11 Use of the outdoor 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith recommenced on a phased basis in April 2021 without access to the changing rooms, supported by the 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:

AREA	ADULT	JUNIOR	TOTAL
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. 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 FAW and IRB approval).
- 5.14 The current 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is one of the few pitches that meets the standard for Gwent County matches. The 3G pitches at Islwyn High School and Blackwood Comprehensive School do not 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 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 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 at present, but there is scope at Islwyn High School for weekend usage of the 3G pitch and Sports Hall. The Council is also continuing to look at further developing 3G pitch provision in the county borough.
- 5.16 With the above detailed 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 15th November 2023 Cabinet unanimously approved a consultation exercise regarding the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.

Conclusion

- 5.19 The indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre closed as result of the UK National lockdown in March 2020 and 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 and does not meet the aspirations set out in the Sport & Active Recreation strategy 2019 – 29 of providing modern, fit for purpose leisure facilities.
- 5.20 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.
- 5.21 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.
- 5.22 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 School.
- 5.23 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 are 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 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 An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken and overall, given that the indoor leisure facilities have been closed for three and a half years, the 3G pitch is at the end of its life, and together with the other facility developments within the county borough there are no significant adverse impacts identified. New facilities are being provided at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners and these together with other alternative facilities will provide more accessible modern, fit for purpose offer for all groups and will have a positive impact. There is a potential for a negative impact resulting from the additional travel distance to Islwyn High School. However, this will only impact on travel to competitive 3G pitch fixtures where this results in longer travel times to alternative facilities depending on point of origin and the extent to which they use current provision for competitive fixtures. Feedback from the consultation exercise will be used to further develop the Integrated Impact Assessment.

[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 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, 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 an estimated £475,159 maintenance backlog.
- 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 15h December 2023 a 6 week public consultation regarding the proposed closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre commenced on Monday 20th November 2023 and will run until Wednesday 3rd January 2024. The consultation seeks views on the detail described within this report and will build upon the Integrated Impact Assessment for the proposal. The consultation exercise includes:
- Consultation process publicised including promotion of face-to-face drop in engagement session dates/locations;
 - Consultation for period of six weeks;
 - Digital engagement page along with frequently asked questions and survey. Hard copies of survey are also available at locations to be agreed prior;
 - Email to signpost stakeholder groups to various opportunities to participate in consultation;
 - Face to face drop in engagement sessions to be held. Locations and timings to be agreed in discussion with local members;
 - Targeted engagement with existing users of 3G facility;
 - Targeted engagement with stakeholders;
 - This Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting provides a further opportunity for elected members to consider and comment upon the proposal.
- 10.3 Feedback from the consultation exercise will help shape recommendations within a further report for Cabinet consideration at a future date to be agreed.

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 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

Appendices:

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

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 28th 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 14th November 2018 – “Draft Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019-29” and relevant minute of meeting**
- **Report to Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee 26th March 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.**
- **Report to Cabinet 10th April 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.**
- **Report to Cabinet 15th November 2023 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and Link to meeting**