

Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee**16 June 2021**

REPORT TITLE:	EUROPA POOLS – OPTIONS FOR 2021 PROVISION OF LEISURE FUN POOL
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides information and options for decision making regarding the reinstatement of the Leisure Pool provision at the Europa Pools facility in Birkenhead for the 2021 school Summer holiday period. Members are asked to note that other facilities used for sport and activity at the site e.g. The lane swimming competition pool / gym etc are not subject to any outcome of this report and have already been reinstated in accordance with the HM Government Roadmap for the reopening of services.

The Leisure Pool facility has been closed since March 2020 as a consequence of the COVID19 pandemic. In March 2021, members were asked to consider the extended closure of the pool until Summer 2022 to support the Council's financial savings targets and as a consequence of uncertainty surrounding the HM Government Pandemic Roadmap post 21 June 2021.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee is requested to:-

(1) Note the information and options presented in this report

(2) Make a decision based upon the information provided on one of the following options to:-

(a) Support the extended closure of the Leisure Pool until the beginning of the 2022 school Summer holiday period and utilise the space within the facility for an alternative provision of sport and activity

or

(b) Instruct the Director of Neighbourhood Services to undertake and facilitate the necessary steps for the reopening of the Leisure Pool for the 2021 school Summer holiday period 19/07/21 – 05/09/21 (inclusive).

This is not a key decision.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 In March 2021, Budget Council agreed to the temporary closure of the Europa Pools leisure pool for the 2021-22 financial period to realise a potential £250,000 saving on facility related expenditure. The basis of the proposal was that the facility was unlikely to be able to open this year at full capacity (necessary to achieve a balanced or surplus financial position) whilst any COVID19 restrictions remained in force. Council did however request that:-

“in implementing the proposals Council requests Europa Fun Pool re-opens, when its practicable and safe to do so in line with government and public health guidance, during the School Summer holidays.”

and that

Unknown intelligence relating to the COVID situation and what that will look like on / post 21 June 2021 and ‘previous advice given by The Director of Public Health in that the fun pool would not be able to open under current restrictions’

- 1.2 Reflecting the national position rates of Covid-19 had been reducing in Wirral following a period of suppression resulting from the ‘lockdown’ period and the rollout of the vaccination programme. However in recent weeks, as restrictions have eased, the number of cases has been increasing. At the time of writing the 7-day case rate has risen to 30.9 per 100,000 people. This rapid rise has also been accompanied by more cases of the new Delta variant which is becoming increasingly dominant nationally and locally. This reflects national evidence suggesting that the later stages of the roadmap out of lockdown are “highly likely” to cause a surge of Covid-19 infections, hospital admissions, and deaths this summer.
- 1.3 Crucially the incidence of Covid-19 in the local community is aligned to the risk of transmission. The national roadmap is not however sensitive to local data therefore any risk assessment needs to consider the local position in relation to the 4 tests for easing as set out by HM Government. These include incidence and mortality rates, hospital admissions, vaccination coverage and variants of concern. As well as the boroughwide position, within Wirral data will need to be appraised, as there is variation in case rates, outcomes, and vaccination coverage in different parts of Wirral. During the pandemic the east of the borough has seen higher cases of covid, worse outcomes and vaccination coverage is lower making this part of Wirral more vulnerable to enduring covid clusters and outbreaks. Measures to reduce risk should therefore respond to the local data and any decision to open the pool should take this intelligence into account.

- 1.4 A significant level of uncertainty remains about the potential impact of COVID19 post 21 June 2021 and in recent weeks, there has been an increased level of localised and national concern surrounding the transmission of bespoke variants of the disease. This has particular relevance as, in order to operate at a financially sustainable position, the Leisure Pool would need maximum occupancy (of circa 160 swimmers per hour). Whilst no current guidance remains available, forecasting demand and operational viability of any future provision remains challenging.
- 1.5 Due to the complex engineering and operational requirements of the leisure pool and recognising that it has remained in a decommissioned state for in excess of 15 months, officers have been allocated circa £90,000 of funding through COVID remobilisation funding at the Council's Strategic Recovery Group. This considers that any decision to reopen the Leisure Pool post 21 June will be too late to undertake much of the essential Health & Safety and recommissioning works necessary if the Leisure Pool were required to reopen for the Summer Holiday period in Summer 2021.
- 1.6 The configuration of the space / shape of the pool also requires significant levels of additional staffing. A separate exercise is being undertaken to recruit ready to work / lifeguarding staff in the event that the pool is required to reopen. The staffing requirement for operating during the 10 week period is estimated to be circa £38,000.
- 1.7 Details of potential forecast revenue generation models at the site have been provided as an Appendix to this report however, income projections are based upon a permitted (currently unknown) number of bathers per session that can be safely accommodated within the leisure pool and will also be subject to the easing of government lockdown restrictions. In the event that the facility opened with any restrictions, it is estimated that the 6-week operation will run at a deficit of circa £30k or more, which would be contrary to the Council decision where the pool would be self-funding and therefore could not take place. Operating within normal (pre-covid) tolerances (max 160 people per session) the Leisure Pool could operate at a surplus between £8k - £76k (after operational expenditure). There is however no assurance that users will return in sufficient numbers to quantify these assumptions, nor that any unforeseen events would detrimentally impact on these projections.
- 1.8 As a contingency to the potential impact of the pandemic and any prospect of the Leisure Pool being unable to reopen in Summer 2021, officers from within Leisure services developed an alternative solution to the use of the leisure pool space. Utilising a mezzanine floor, the space can be reprovisioned as a much-needed multi station gym / exercise space. The existing gym provision at Europa Pools was constructed as a retrospective "add-on" and consequently suffers from a lack of space and equipment. The provision of additional gym and exercise space has the potential to increase memberships and pay and go use of the facility, resulting in much needed income without the associated cost incurred by a leisure pool.

- 1.9 There would be no requirement for the excessive heating, pumps and equipment, additional staffing and other expenditure associated with the Leisure Pool whilst the additional equipment would provide access to physical activity for those living in the area and who use the centre. Modelling suggests that with the right level of usage and marketing activity, the gym could provide a return on investment within 6 months. Works to provide adequate levels of ventilation in the space have already been completed.
- 1.10 Capital funding has been vired under officer delegation to fund the supply and installation of the temporary gym space within the Leisure pool footprint so there will be no additional budget requests. In addition, the gym can be removed, dismantled and stored for re-installation during periods outside of the school Summer holidays in future years, when use of the Leisure Pool is typically low.
- 1.11 It is expected that all other WBC owned and operated pools (with the exception of Woodchurch) will be fully operational by the start of the school Summer holidays in 2021. This includes the alternative Leisure Pool at Guinea Gap. There will therefore be sufficient access to swimming provision during the Summer.
- 1.12 Evidence gathered from other operators of similar facilities, in particular those in the Liverpool City Region / Northwest England suggest there is a mixed picture of future plans. The Chester Northgate Arena, operated by BRIO Leisure on behalf of Cheshire West & Chester is open, yet not planning to operate at full capacity until such time Public Health feel this is appropriate, and which will contribute to the wider borough management of the infection rates. BRIO indicate that the best they could hope to achieve (notwithstanding any impacts of the June 14 announcement) would be a maximum of 70% capacity. The company and Council are mindful of the recent increasing virus rates in the region and the associated risk of transmission. Splash World in Sefton have issued media releases announcing that their Southport based leisure pool will not be reopening until the *“second half of 2022”* due to *“significant health & safety concerns”*

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 This report considers the two options available for the use of the leisure pool space at Europa Pools. There are no other options to consider at present.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 On 18 December 2020, a range of proposals, contributing to the 2021/22 draft budget were published as part of the public budget consultation process. This ran from 21 December 2020 to 29 January 2021 and used a variety of methods to collate responses.

- 3.2 It was originally proposed that Europa Pools would be closed achieving a saving of £0.64m. This option was posed as a question as part of the public consultation process. Of those stakeholders who responded to the questionnaire regarding this proposal 52% disagreed with this option (33% strongly), 33% agreed (16% strongly) and 14% were neutral.
- 3.3 This savings proposal was discussed at Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee on 21 January 2021. Members were informed that the element of Europa Pools which was more expensive to operate was the fun pool, and there had been many requests to keep the competitive pool open as it was the only one in the borough with a grandstand and a moveable floor. It was noted that closing the facility would have a detrimental effect on residents' ability to exercise which could have a negative impact on the Leisure Strategy, where Sport England would be undertaking a detailed needs analysis. In addition, it was noted that the Fun Pool would require significant Capital investment to bring it up to the required standard.
- 3.4 Detailed analysis of customer numbers and income generation showed that demand for the Fun Pool was greatest during the summer months, when the service generated more income than expenditure. Providing the Fun Pool was able to run at full capacity with no restrictions it was concluded that it would be possible to achieve a saving of £0.25m by opening the Fun Pool for 12 weeks of the year and exploring other opportunities to utilise the space for the remainder of the year. This option was agreed at Budget Council on 1 March 2021.
- 3.5 The Ministry for Housing, Local Government and Communities have provided a conditional offer of exceptional financial support (capitalisation directive) for 2021/22 of up to £10.7m. One of the conditions of that offer is that the Council will need to provide evidence from the assurance review of the authority's financial position and its ability to meet any or all of the identified budget gap without any additional borrowing.
- 3.6 Therefore, it is vitally important that the Council has robust processes in place to manage and monitor the in-year financial position, to ensure it is reporting a forecast balanced position to the end of the year and that the process for 22/23 budget setting is underway early so that an agreed budget can be agreed by Full Council in March.
- 3.7 Members will note that one of the key documents required to enable the Council to receive approval for exceptional financial support was a balanced five-year medium term financial plan (MTFP). A summary of this was provided in the budget report to the Committee on 17 March 2021. This document was prepared by Officers and now requires committee oversight and approval.
- 3.8 In order for the pool to generate a return of £0.25m saving, there must be a guarantee that the maximum capacity of the pool will be achieved. If there is a risk that this will not happen, Members will need to consider that risk against a decision to re-open the pool whilst the Council is under a conditional offer of exceptional financial support. If

the pool is re-opened and the requisite numbers are not reached, Covid-19 funding is not available to support any overspends and alternative savings will need to be found within the Committee's budget in year to offset the overspend.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial implications relating to this option are detailed in Appendix 1.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The provision of a Leisure Pool offer is a non-statutory function of the Council. There are therefore no legal implications associated with this report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

6.1 Additional staffing requirements to support the operation of a reinstated leisure pool would require a recruitment exercise for Ready to Work staff. In the event of full deployment, the cost of staffing is estimated at circa £38,000 for the 10 week requirement. Were the pool not to reopen there would be no additional staffing cost to the Authority.

6.2 Asset related works relating to the reopening of the Europa Pools facility have been completed prior to recent remobilisation of the full site. Some additional minor works may be required subject to any future decision around reopening of the Leisure Pool.

6.3 Health & Safety and engineering works to recommission equipment necessary to enable the reinstatement of the Leisure Pool have commenced.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

7.1 Financial – The closure of the leisure pool for the 2021/22 financial year was expected to realise the anticipated saving of £250,000 as per the budget decision. In the event that the pool reopens at any point during the financial year, the risk of achievement of this saving becomes compromised as neither income or usage can be guaranteed.

7.2 Operational – Work to undertake essential H&S and engineering works to recommission the leisure pool have commenced. There is however no assurance that, in the event if any equipment failure / breakdown, contractors can be commissioned with enough time to reinstate any operational defects.

7.3 COVID 19 – At the time of writing, uncertainty remains regarding the post 21 June 2021 position on COVID19 restrictions and the HM Govt Roadmap. Although this position may be clearer at the time at which Committee meets, in the event that the required numbers of users is subject to any ongoing restrictions, this will compromise the viability of any pool reopening.

- 7.4 Public Health – Even with the achievement of COVID secure status and / or the implementation of rigorous infection control measures, the risk of transmission of infection cannot be eliminated when considering the reopening of the Leisure Pool facility with the numbers of proposed users. Members attention is drawn to the recent outbreak traced back to a swimming pool in Formby, Sefton in May 2021.
- 7.5 Reputational – The Leisure Pool is a highly valued Council provision, and sought after activity for local people, in particular during school holiday periods when leisure swimming is at its peak. The decision to keep the pool closed will carry significant reputational risk. The availability of other Council owned swimming pools across the Borough, including public access to the alternative pool at Europa does provide some mitigation.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 At its meeting on 18 December 2020, the Policy and Resources Committee approved the 'Draft Revenue Budget 2021/22 – Proposals for Consultation' to begin public consultation from 21 December 2020 to 29 January 2021. The consultation was primarily conducted through the council's "Have your Say" online portal. A "Budget Booklet" outlining budget options was provided and a variety of methods were used to collect responses. These included online and paper based questionnaires, an ideas board, virtual public events, access to the Council' Facebook page and a budget specific email inbox.
- 8.2 Consultations also took place with Officers and representatives from Trade Unions throughout January and February 2021.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.
- 9.2 At this time, there are no equality implications associated with this report. However, where the budget is unbalanced and further proposals are required, then there may be equality implications associated with these, and these will be addressed within the relevant business cases presented to the Committee.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Reinstatement of the Europa Pools Leisure Pool will see a significant increase in the levels of energy used at the facility. The requirement to heat the pool and provide

power for flumes and wave generation in addition to standard utility requirements – heating lighting etc and other general maintenance, is expected to cost in the region of £23,000 for the 6 week school holiday period.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Financial Modelling Assumptions



Europa Financial
Information 6 week pl

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1 March 2021 – Council Budget Meeting

17 February 2021 – Policy and Resources Committee

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy and Resources Committee	17/03/21
Budget Council	01/03/21
Policy and Resources Committee	17/02/21
Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee	21/01/21
Policy and Resources Committee	18/12/21
Policy and Resources Committee	07/10/21