

Report Title:	EXTENDED CLOSURE OF EUROPA POOLS LEISURE POOL
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REPORT SUMMARY

At the meeting of the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee (TCCL) on 16th June 2021 a decision was taken to reopen Europa Leisure Pool for the 2021 school summer holiday period 19/07/21– 05/09/21 (inclusive) subject to there being no covid restrictions imposed by the Government during that period.

Wirral continues to experience an increasing number of new cases of Covid19. Owing to the rapid increase in new infections, dominated by the Delta variant, Liverpool City Region was designated, by HM Government, as an area of Enhanced Response on 14th June 2021. The current rate of infection in Wirral is fourth highest in the Liverpool City Region and as at 14th July 2021, in the top 20 nationally. Further detail on Wirral infection rates is provided in section 3.5 of this report.

This report therefore recommends that the decision of the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee on 16 June 2021 is not implemented as the opening of this facility at the capacity required to ensure the protection of public health and financial viability would be unsustainable in light of these local conditions.

The provision of a Leisure Pool offer is a non-statutory function of the Council.

This is not a Key decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS (DECISION)

It is recommended that the Director of Neighbourhoods agree not to reopen Europa Fun Pool during the school summer holiday period from 19/07/21 - 5/9/21 and authorise the utilisation of the space within the facility for an alternative provision of sport and activity.

OFFICER DECISION NOTICE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 At a meeting of the Council's Policy & Resources Committee on 31 June 2021, the Committee endorsed the Chief Executive or a Director to suspend, vary or cease operation of a Council venue or facilities as a response to Coronavirus related events, including compliance with Government and public health advice, prioritisation of resource availability and economic impact.
- 1.2 The Chief Executive or a Director taking individual decisions in relation to venues would be based upon 3 criteria – Covid Guidance Compliance (H&S), Ability to function (business continuity), Financial Considerations (commerciality). A risk profile for these criteria relative to the full operation of the Europa Fun Pool is provided below.

CRITERIA	RISK	COMMENTS
<p>Covid Guidance compliance (health and safety)</p> <p>Can the venue operate whilst wholly complying with Government (PHE) Guidance in relation to Coronavirus? As the local authority, if the answer to this question is 'no', then the venue should not open. Allied to this are considerations of the duty of care to residents, visitors and staff.</p>		<p>Due to the design and nature of the fun pool and its traditional popularity there will be a number of elements that significantly increase the risk factors around COVID guidance compliance, and consequently increase the risk of infection / transmission.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Queuing – although outside managing the potential queues will place additional pressure on staff or require additional staff. 2. Access – The reception area at site is confined and will place additional pressure on staff and increased risk of people not following any relevant guidance. Risk of transmission could increase. 3. Changing Areas – The changing areas are compact and will only allow a controlled number of users. These will need to be cleaned after each use and will also impact the flow of large numbers of potential users. 4. Fun pool element – As this is a free-form pool, controlling swimmers without use of lane ropes would be almost impossible. There are a number of features which make up the fun pool element and these would not be available as they would increase the risk of people bumping into each other. 5. Staff impact – Needs to be considered if significant numbers of users are accessing the facility and the potential for an outbreak of COVID at site.
<p>Ability to function (business continuity)</p> <p>Disruption caused by the closure of schools, self-isolation, redeployment and other factors will affect the ability of the Council to run a venue. There will be occasion when the Council will need to prioritise the deployment of staff and resources and will have to choose not to open a facility to the public for these reasons</p>		<p>The significant factor is with regards to staff impact and risk. If there is an outbreak on site within the staff group and isolation is required there are not enough residual staff to transfer or redeploy from other sites to keep Europa open.</p> <p>Whilst additional RTW staff are being recruited, due to its popularity and complexity we tend to utilise more experienced staff at Europa.</p> <p>We must ensure that all staff working at Europa will have undertaken all site-specific training, National Pool Lifeguard Qualifications, relevant COVID training.</p> <p>As a service we do not sacrifice safety</p>

		<p>by reducing numbers of qualified staff on poolside.</p> <p>There have been 2 recent outbreaks within staff at other Wirral Council Leisure facilities with pools as at 14/7/2021</p>
<p>C. Financial considerations (commerciality)</p> <p>There are some venues that will require significant cost to prepare to open. The risk of that being wasted costs may be too high to invest those monies until such time as the Council is assured that the Coronavirus restrictions will be lifted. This may impact on the run-up time and result in delayed opening.</p> <p>More likely is that there may be venues or facilities that would be technically able to open and function in a manner compliant with the Govt Guidance, but to do so would be likely to mean that the costs involved are prohibitive and it is considered uneconomic to fully open or run them</p>		<p>The cost of the re-mobilisation to date is approximately £15k</p> <p>This includes M&E, staffing, COVID requirements etc.</p> <p>A separate exercise has been undertaken with regards to potential income / loss and presented at previous committees.</p> <p>If the pool operates under COVID regulations/guidance it is anticipated that an operational revenue loss will be incurred during the 6-week summer holiday period beyond £30k.</p> <p>This has considered recruitment, training, staff costs, utilities, and reduced bather numbers.</p> <p>Other facilities with pools (although not with the full 'fun factor') are available across the Borough. This includes the lane pool at Europa and a family pool at Guinea Gap that operate within strict COVID guidelines</p>

1.3 Based on the above assessment and the meeting of the 3 required criteria, the Europa Pools Fun Pool would not be capable of achieving the necessary requirements to support a safe, continuous, and commercially viable operation during the Summer of 2021.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

2.1 Reopen the Leisure Pool at full capacity – this option is not recommended as it would fail to satisfy the conditions on which the Council has agreed to reinstate venues as per section 1.2 of this report.

2.2 Reopen the Leisure Pool at reduced capacity. This option was discounted as financial modelling indicates that the facility could potentially incur significant losses. As the leisure pool environment is predominantly uncontrollable, there is also no assurance that even with measures in place, there would be no infection transmission risks.

2.3 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 re-provisioned 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. 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.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 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’

- 3.2 At the meeting of the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee (TCCL) on 16th June 2021, a report was considered by members for a decision as to whether the facility should be reopened or otherwise for the 2021 school summer holidays. It was resolved by Committee that:-

(1) the information and options presented in the ‘Europa Pools – options for 2021 provision of leisure fun pool’ report be noted; and

(2) the Director of Neighbourhood Services be instructed 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) subject to there being no covid restrictions imposed by the Government during that period

- 3.3 At the meeting of the TCCL Committee on 16th June 2021, Wirral’s Director of Public Health (DPH), informed Members that the North West region was the epicentre of ‘delta variant’ cases with a 59% increase in the previous week, in a younger age group including children. This position has only deteriorated since. The DPH advised not to open for the numbers of customers needed to make it viable.
- 3.4 Since the aforementioned resolution at the TCCL Committee, there has been further significant increase in localised transmission of the COVID19 Delta variant. This is shown within the information provided below. That transmission is particularly high amongst younger age groups – the primary demographic of those most likely to utilise the fun pool provision at Europa Pools.

- 3.5 Wirral continues to experience an increasing number of new cases of Covid-19. The Borough has the highest case rate in Cheshire and Merseyside, as at 10th July 2021, with a weekly rate of 515.4 per 1000,000; equating to 1,670 people. This represents a 14% increase compared to the previous week with an average of 234 new cases per day. The largest proportion of cases were in children and younger adults aged 10-19 years (27.8%, n=464), Bidston and St James had the 3rd highest number of cases (n=98). Bidston and St James has the third lowest uptake for first dose vaccine (70.9%) and in the east of the borough uptake of Covid-19 vaccine (first dose) is lower compared to the Wirral average (82.4%); Birkenhead and Tranmere have the lowest uptake (68.7%) followed by Seacombe (71.5%).
- 3.6 In line with increasing cases, the number of patients with Covid-19 in hospital in Wirral has also risen. Whilst significantly lower than the number in hospital between January and March 2021 resumption of NHS services combined with the additional pressure of Covid-19 presents challenges for the health and care system now and into the Autumn.
- 3.7 Owing to the rapid increase in new infections, dominated by the Delta variant, Liverpool City Region was designated, by HM Government, as an area of Enhanced Response on 14th June 2021. The current rate of infection in Wirral is fourth highest in the Liverpool City Region and in the top 20 nationally. Infection rates across the North West also continue to increase and new cases of Covid-19 are now rising across the country.
- 3.8 As well as a combination of vaccination, testing and case and contact management, infection control measures are critical to reducing infections. Between January and April 2021, it was these measures that kept cases low, not vaccines, and the easing of these measures is causing the current rise in cases. The summer school holidays will support efforts to suppress new infection, as cases are highest amongst those aged 10 – 19, combined with the continued roll out of the vaccination which will reduce hospitalisation and deaths. However further easing of Covid-19 restrictions in England on 19th July will increase new infections, subsequent hospitalisations, and deaths. Areas with high and enduring transmission, such as Wirral, can expect to see ongoing increases in new cases of Covid-19 and subsequently hospital admissions. Ensuring continuing measures to prevent infections, in high-risk settings and amongst groups and communities most at risk of infection, therefore remains critical to protect residents and staff.
- 3.9 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.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Both income and expenditure are impossible to forecast accurately currently as when the facilities re-open we do not know what the usage uptake will be, impact of supporting COVID, and budget impact. There are significant uncertainties with plant that could increase expenditure once the swimming pool is re-filled.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no legal implications arising directly out of this report. The provision and operation of a Leisure pool facility is not a statutory requirement of the Council.

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. Health & Safety and engineering works to recommission equipment necessary to enable the reinstatement of the Leisure Pool have commenced.
- 6.3 To date, approximately £15,000 of COVID remobilisation funding has been spent on the reinstatement of the pool (£3k refilling & heating, £5k electrical control gear, £2.8k balance tank replacement & cleaning, £5k weekly running cost – full reinstatement now in place for 1 week)

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 **USAGE / FINANCE** – feedback suggests that many customers are not returning initially (no definitive number) which will impact income opportunities.
- 7.2 **COVID19** – As expected, the HM Govt roadmap of lifting coronavirus restrictions will continue as planned and the legal requirements on non-opening of venues to the public will come to an end. This is in the context of a rapidly changing and worsening of case numbers as the Delta variant of Covid-19 spreads. In addition to compliance with likely changing Government and public health guidance, additional requirements are likely to be placed upon the Council in terms of deployment of resources to respond to public health events, business continuity and commerciality that will have a direct and immediate effect on the operation of Council venues and facilities. In view of the constantly changing COVID19 landscape, it may be necessary for the Chief Executive or a Director to suspend, vary or cease operation of a Council venue or facilities as a response to

Coronavirus related events, including compliance with Government and public health advice, prioritisation of resource availability and economic impact.

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.
- 8.3 This decision has been taken in consultation with Wirral’s Director of Public Health. Political party Group Leaders were provided with an update and rationale for this decision at a meeting on 15th July 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.

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

BACKGROUND PAPERS

HM Government Guidance - <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
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**Council Budget Meeting
Policy and Resources Committee
Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure
Committee**

**1/3/2021
17/02/2021
16/06/2021**