

TOURISM, COMMUNITIES, CULTURE & LEISURE COMMITTEE**Thursday 16th June 2022**

REPORT TITLE:	LEISURE AND LIBRARIES BUDGET SAVING CONSULTATION OUTCOMES.
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides Committee with the outcomes of public consultation exercises undertaken in relation to the development of new models of service delivery, in respect of Leisure and Library Services. The consultation outcomes will contribute to the five thematic priorities within the Wirral Plan 2021-26 that focus on improving outcomes for whole population groups.

On 28 February 2022, Budget Council agreed a balanced budget for the 2022/23 financial year. The budget was predicated on assumptions that there would be cessation of services within the Neighbourhoods Directorate to generate savings and allow for the balanced budget to be achievable. Public consultations on affected service changes and closures prior to the final decision by the Committee on what decisions to then take in the expenditure of their budget provision in exercise of their functions, were also agreed as follows:

- The Closure of the Fun (Leisure) Pool at Europa Pools and the development of a fitness facility
- The Closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre
- The Closure (for a 12-month period) of Wirral Tennis & Sports Centre for redevelopment
- The closure of Brackenwood (18 Hole), Hoylake (18 hole), Wallasey Beach and Kings Parade (pitch n putt) golf courses

The public consultation exercise was opened on the Councils Have Your Say platform between 31st January 2022, and 27th March 2022.

A separate consultation exercise was undertaken on the Council's proposals for a new operating model for Library Services, including a number of library closures. This consultation ran for 8 weeks from 21 February to 18 April 2022.

This decision affects all wards.

This matter is key decision as the saving is greater than £500,000 and the service changes involved are significant in terms of their effect upon communities living and working within the borough.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee is recommended to:

1. Consider the outcomes of all public consultation exercises for Leisure & Library Services as contained in the "Have Your Say" consultation reports at Appendix 1-4 (Leisure) and Appendix 8 (Libraries)
2. Approve the implementation of Option 3 as the new core operating model for Wirral's Library Service with a detailed implementation plan to be presented back to a future meeting of this Committee in September 2022.
3. Approve the permanent closure of the leisure pool at Europa Pools, with alternative provision and pool-based activities for children and young people within the main competition pool (and other sites where permissible).
4. Approve the retention of the alternative fitness offer within the space previously occupied by the leisure pool at Europa Pools.
5. Approve the permanent closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre.
6. Approve the permanent closure of Brackenwood and Hoylake Golf courses, and the closure of Kings Parade and Wallasey Beach pitch n putt golf courses.
7. Approve the reinstatement of the tennis offer, and development of community offer at the Wirral Tennis & Sports Centre (WTSC) subject to the implementation of a new model for tennis at the site, established through a partnership agreement with the Lawn Tennis Association as contained in Appendix 5, and with the development proposal submitted by Alliance Leisure in Appendix 6 that will continue to achieve the agreed budget savings for 2022/23.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1. The Council must legally set a balanced budget as per the Local Government Act 2003. The legislation leaves discretion to the Council about the allowances to be made and action to be taken, however the CIPFA external assurance report commissioned by Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities gave clear direction that the Council must reduce its costs associated with leisure and cultural activities.
- 1.2. The associated savings identified within the scope of this report and approved by Budget Council on 28 February 2022, have contributed to the setting of a 2022/23 balanced budget and must not be reversed.
- 1.3. The Committee is accountable for ensuring that the committee budgets remain within the relevant envelope and will take collective responsibility via the Policy and Resources Committee, to ensure that the whole Council budget always remains in balance, by agreeing mitigating actions to bring the budget back in line, should a deficit be forecast.
- 1.4. The Council is currently subject to an External Assurance Review including oversight by an independent panel on scrutiny of its Finance and Governance. Failure to implement the identified and approved savings or to recommend a reversal of the approved savings, would constitute a loss of confidence in the Council's ability to follow through on its budgetary and financial commitments, which in turn would result in Central Government intervention.

2. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1. A range of options as detailed in the appendices to the report have been the subject of public consultation in relation to the development of new models of service delivery in respect of Leisure and Library Services. Beyond those options consulted upon a further option would be to do nothing. This option would not deliver the savings set out in the 2022/23 budget and would require the Council to seek alternative sources for savings, which have yet to be identified. No alternative savings would be identified in the timeframe available and would therefore result in an overspend of the 2022/23 budget and inevitably result in Government intervention as a result of the Council's inability to manage its finances effectively.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1. In response to a request for 'Exceptional Financial Support' to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DHLUC), an external finance and governance assurance review was commissioned by the Department which outlined an underlying structural financial deficit in Wirral Council. A condition of the original £10.7m request required the Council to develop a financial recovery plan over the next 3 years, to mitigate the financial deficit. The report focused on the Council's delivery of Neighbourhood Services as being an excess area of spend, including those largely non statutory, asset-based services such as leisure centres and golf courses in addition to libraries.
- 3.2. The Council approved a balanced budget for the 2022/23 financial year on 28th February 2022, which was predicated on proposals to review/cease services to generate budget savings. As part of the budget recommendations, the budgets were

removed from some of these services from 1 April 2022 and the services temporarily closed. Council agreed to undertake public consultation for the following to determine whether to keep these services closed on a permanent basis:

- Golf Offer (Brackenwood & Hoylake, and two pitch n putt Courses)
- Closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre
- Closure of Europa (Fun) Leisure Pool & Enhancement of the Gym Offer
- Temporary Closure and Remodelling of Bidston Tennis Centre
- A New Strategy and Operating Model for Wirral Libraries

3.3. A public consultation was opened on the Have Your Say platform for each proposal on 31st January 2022 and closed on 27th March 2022 with exception of libraries which was subject to its own statutory consultation (detailed below). The full report for each individual consultation is detailed within Appendix 1-4 including a thematic analysis of open responses. The following sections provide a summary of outcomes.

Europa Pools Leisure Pool

3.4. The questionnaire had 240 online responses, with no paper copies submitted. Of those responses, 74% said they, or somebody they cared for were regular users of Wirral Council swimming pools, and 28% said they were members of the Invigor8 scheme. The overall results show a lack of agreement with the saving, with an average disagree response over 4 questions of 75%

Golf Courses

3.5. The questionnaire had 433 online responses, with no paper copies submitted. Of those responses, 65% said they, or somebody they cared for were regular users of Wirral's Municipal Golf Courses, and 39% said they were members of the Invigor8 scheme. 68% of respondents disagree with the budget proposal to close Brackenwood Golf Course, and 62% of respondents disagreed with the budget saving, to closure Hoylake Golf course. In respect of the Leisure golf courses, 45% of respondents disagreed with the closure, in comparison to 41% agreeing with the budget saving.

3.6. It should be noted, that as of 5th May 2022, there are two online petitions against the closure of Brackenwood and Hoylake Golf Courses, which have 3,163 and 869 signatures, respectively.

Woodchurch Leisure Centre Consultation

3.7. The questionnaire had 303 online responses with no paper copies submitted. Of those responses, 72% said they, or somebody they cared for were regular users of Wirral Council swimming pools, and 24% said they were members of the Invigor8 scheme. The overall results show a disagreement with the saving, with an average disagree response over 3 questions of 81%.

3.8. It should be noted that as of 5th May 2022, there are 4,911 signatures against the closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre.

Wirral Tennis and Sports Centre (WTSC) Consultation

3.9. The questionnaire had 148 online and 9 paper responses. Of those responses, 65% said they, or somebody they cared for were regular users of Wirral Tennis Centre, and 48% said they were members of the Invigor8 scheme. The overall results were mixed, with an average response over the 3 questions of 43% in favour, and 42% against the budget saving.

- 3.10. The consultation exercise for WTSC received representation from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) in their capacity as the national governing body for tennis. The LTA expressed concern at the proposed closure of three out of the six indoor tennis courts at the site. Consequently, the LTA have proposed a package of measures that will both deliver the required level of saving at the site together with a wider package of investment funding on Wirral both at WTSC and in outdoor courts across the borough. The offer submitted by the LTA is provided as Appendix 5.
- 3.11. Retention of all six tennis courts, would not preclude planned development within other areas of the site to enable the introduction of community-based activities and other improvements within the facility, providing a broader mixed use, and financially sustainable model. Supporting the LTA proposed model, would however require Wirral to relinquish significant control of tennis operations at the site in favour of the introduction of an LTA approved dedicated tennis operator.
- 3.12. The redevelopment of the WTSC is dealt with as part of the Facilities Investment Strategy and officers have provided a fully costed and revenue driven proposal for the development of the site at Appendix 6 within this report, in order to demonstrate that both tennis and community outcomes can be accommodated, alongside a positive future revenue position.

Libraries – New Operating Model

- 3.13. At its meeting of 18 January 2022, Committee received a report “Library Strategy & Future Operating Model” which provided the outcomes of the Library Strategy consultation and emerging Library Model for approval, with three options for an operating model to take to consultation. The Strategy and preferred core option strived to provide a balanced, modern, and fit for purpose Library Service in Wirral, to ensure that all residents had access to a comprehensive and efficient service which was relevant, based on need, and financially sustainable. The report explained that maintaining 24 library sites was unsustainable and was a constraint on development. Details of this report and Option 3 (recommended) can be found in ‘Library Strategy and Future Operating Model’ page 13-14 (Appendix 7).
- 3.14. The new model proposed the closure of eleven library sites within Wirral, and subsequent public consultation on the closure of these sites. Following the meeting of Policy & Resources Committee on 15th February 2022 it was recommended that “...reprovision of the Library Service” be amended to reduce the savings proposals so as to make sufficient monies available to enable Greasby and Rock Ferry libraries to remain operating for the purposes of community facility and library centres at a cost of £162,000”. This was subsequently agreed as part of the 2022/23 budget by Full Council on 28 February 2022. A fourth option, Option 3 (as amended), was added to the consultation to reflect this decision.
- 3.15. Members of this committee approved the recommendations within the report subject to a full and meaningful consultation on the three options presented and the amendment put forward at the Policy and Resource Committee. Due to the statutory nature of a library service, this work was commissioned to a third party, independent research company.
- 3.16. The consultation ran for 8 weeks from 21 February to 18 April 2022. Members will note that work to introduce a new Library Strategy & Operating Model was in development prior to the commencement of the budget setting process and had already been subject to an earlier public consultation between 28 June 2021 and 20 September 2021 on the future of the service. A summary of the most recent

consultation is provided below. A full report, including thematic analysis and outcomes of targeted focus groups can be found in Appendix 8.

- 2023 responses (1123 online/paper and 900 depth telephone) & eight targeted focus groups
- Highest representation from users of the four central libraries
- Original officer recommendation Option 3 was the most preferred option
- Option 1 (**4%**), Option 2 (**15%**), Option 3 (**37%**), Option 3 (as amended) (**32%**), None of the options (**11%**), Don't know (**1%**)
- Saturday was the most preferred day to use the library (51%)
- Morning and afternoon opening sessions were equally preferred
- 49% of respondents say they would not use a mobile library vs. 44% of people who said they would or might
- 56% of respondents said they would prefer to use a library building instead of a mobile library

3.17. If approved, the next steps for the Library Service will be to develop and present a detailed implementation plan for the core model (Option 3), taking into consideration the outcomes of the consultation relating to this option. This will outline the final scope, key timescales, milestones, cost of implementation, mitigation, and risk management approach. This plan will be presented back to a future date of this committee (September 2022). The service will also be required to undertake a statutory period of staff consultation with the trade unions.

3.18. The plan will incorporate consideration of the Council's agreed corporate Service Design principles. This will be managed and reported back to Committee at an agreed frequency. Any surplus assets resulting from library closures will be considered as part of the Community Asset Transfer policy that is being presented as a separate agenda item to this committee.

3.19. In response to the proposed closure of a number of Library sites, several petitions were received by the Council relating to individual site closures, these were as follows:

- Friends of Bromborough Library – petition 3619 signatures
- Friends of Greasby Library – petition 2804 signatures
- Wallasey Village Library – petition 1522 signatures
- Hoylake Library – petition 1262 signatures
- Rock Ferry Library – petition “over 1,000” signatures
- Prenton Library – petition 327 signatures

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. The financial savings against the budget proposals are highlighted below. Table 1 shows the financial implications of the five identified options against the recommendations, and Table 2 shows the financial implications as per P&R Committee, 15th February 2022.

Table 1: Savings proposals with Option 3 (recommended) new libraries operating model

Saving Proposal	Saving (£m)
Closure of Europa Fun/Leisure Pool & Enhanced Gym Offer	0.266
Permanent Closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre	0.402
Temporary Closure and Remodelling of Bidston Tennis Centre	0.114
Review of Golf Offer	0.328
Reprovisioning of Library Service (Core model, Option 3 – recommended)	0.814
Total	1.924

Table 2: Savings proposal as agreed at P&R Committee 15th February 2022

Saving Proposal	Saving (£m)
Closure of Europa Fun/Leisure Pool & Enhanced Gym Offer	0.266
Permanent Closure of Woodchurch Leisure Centre	0.402
Temporary Closure and Remodelling of Bidston Tennis Centre	0.114
Review of Golf Offer	0.328
Reprovisioning of Library Service (Option 3 – amended P&R Committee 15.02.22)	0.652
Total	1.762

4.2. Any recommendations not approved by this committee will have an adverse financial implication, which will require an alternative proposal to source the funds from elsewhere, and make the saving and the budget, allocated by Full Council. Given the timescale to achieve full-year savings this will not be possible and therefore will present an overspend on the Council's 2022/23 budget.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, the Council has a statutory obligation to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service available to everyone, to promote this service, and to lend books and other written materials free of charge.

5.2. The Local Authority is also under a general Duty of Best Value to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.” To achieve the right balance before deciding how to fulfil their Best Value Duty authorities are under a Duty to Consult.

5.3. Consultation has taken place in respect of the priorities and views of the public in regard to the savings identified within this report.

5.4. The report sets out the relevant considerations for Members to consider during their deliberations and Members are reminded of the need to ignore irrelevant considerations. Members have a duty to seek to ensure that the Council acts lawfully and, where a service is provided pursuant to a statutory duty, it would not be lawful to fail to discharge it properly or abandon it, and where there is discretion as to how it is to be discharged, that discretion should be exercised reasonably. Members must not come to a decision which no reasonable authority could come to; balancing the nature, quality, and level of services which they consider should be provided, against the costs of providing such services.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

6.1. Arrangements will be made to recover ICT assets as appropriate from assets set for closure.

6.2. All the budget proposals involve either alterations to, closure, or decommissioning of Council assets. Additionally, there may be impact of the Council's asset portfolio through the implementation of CAT, which would depend upon the terms of any asset transfer, should they take place.

7. RELEVANT RISKS

7.1. Failure to implement or agree to the recommendations would jeopardise the savings being actualised within the 22/23 financial year. This would result in the 2022/23 savings not being met and undermining progress to improving the Council's financial resilience as recommended by DLUHC.

7.2. Failure to implement or recommend a reversal of identified and approved savings would constitute a loss of confidence in the Council's ability to follow through on its budgetary and financial commitments, which in turn would result in Central Government intervention.

8. ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1. Statutory consultation was undertaken through the Have Your Say portal and independent research company (Libraries) to inform the outcomes of this report.

8.2. The Library Service has maintained regular engagement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) who act as superintendent for Library Authorities in England. A total of six update meetings have taken place during the development of the new operating model, most recently 16th May 2022. The meetings provide DCMS with oversight, and act as a health check on the approach the Library Service has taken in developing a new operating model. This provides assurance that the Library Service will continue to provide a comprehensive and efficient service, and information on any forthcoming changes to the Library Service, whilst safeguarding and/or mitigating against any potential future risks. This is an iterative dialogue, and the service will continue to engage with DCMS at all major milestones.

8.3. For these savings that have a staffing implication, consultation has been ongoing with trade unions and relevant staff groups as required and in accordance with section 188(1A) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act (TULRCA) 1992). All appropriate and required dialogue and consultation with Trade Unions will take place regularly throughout the process.

9. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. The equality implications have been considered within the individual savings proposals via the completion of equality impact assessments. They are available at the following link <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments/equality-impact-assessments-2021/budget>
- 9.2. The methodology for the consultations were considerate of accessibility and equality requirements, adjusting accordingly to facilitate this need.

10. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The closure of historically inefficient Leisure facilities will reduce energy use and overall Council carbon emissions, supporting the Climate Emergency agenda. Implications for the Environment and Climate Emergency will be considered with regards to disposal of any assets.
- 10.2. Should CAT not be pursued following the closure of Hoylake and Brackenwood golf courses, habitat restoration, green/blue infrastructure and rewilding of the land is an alternative option which support the Councils Environmental and Climate Emergency agenda.

11. COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. The recommendations as presented in this report have implications for key community assets which will be addressed through the Community Asset Transfer process in accordance with its policy. During this process, opportunities to deliver on and achieve the outcomes as outlined in the Council's Community Wealth Building Strategy 2020-2025 will be captured and delivered. For example: Outcome 3 – Council land and assets are used as a base to build community wealth.
- 11.2. Under the Library Strategy and new operating model, libraries are seen as a key catalyst to development and opportunities for individuals and groups of residents in Wirral. This includes ensuring everyone has equal opportunities and skills to empower them from school readiness to employment and beyond. The Library Service will look to develop a shared programme of work with Lifelong Learning to provide Essential Digital Skills for those transitioning between careers or as an entry route to employment. This delivers on Outcome 5 of the Community Wealth Building Strategy – Residents of Wirral are in secure and quality employment with progression opportunities and good terms and conditions.
- 11.3. In addition, Birkenhead Library has just become an arm of the regional Business & Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC) which is designed to provide any individual or business with specialist help and support. They offer free to use databases which offer up to date business and market information, one-to-one business and intellectual property advice, dedicated workspaces, workshops, and other events as well as access to a network of businesses and advisors. Birkenhead Library has also been awarded £125k under the Libraries Improvement Fund to develop a new digital hub, provide agile working space for individuals and businesses, and improve facilities and reach to address digital exclusion and essential skills.

REPORT AUTHOR:

Andy McCartan, Assistant Director, Leisure, Libraries & Customer Engagement
Andrewmccartan@wirral.gov.uk

Tom Arthur
Assistant Modernisation Officer, Neighbourhoods
Tomarthur@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

- Appendix 1 Golf Public Consultation Report
- Appendix 2 Europa Fun Pool Public Consultation Report
- Appendix 3 Tennis Public Consultation Report
- Appendix 4 Woodchurch Leisure Centre Public Consultation Report
- Appendix 5 Lawn Tennis Association Partnership Agreement
- Appendix 6 Wirral Tennis Sports Centre Development Proposal
- Appendix 7 New Library Strategy and Operating Model (TCCL January 18th, 2022)
- Appendix 8 Wirral Libraries Consultation Report

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Library Strategy and Future Operating Model – Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee 18th January 2022

2022/23 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan – Policy and Resources Committee 15th February 2022

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – CIPFA Local Government Financial review: Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, November 2021

Governance Review: Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council – Ada Burns, September 2021

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee	18th January 2022
Policy and Resources Committee	15th February 2022