

Shrewsbury Sports Village Transformation Proposals for new fitness and pool facilities at Sundorne

Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee

9th February 2024

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Overview

This report responds to the call-in submitted by Councillor Roger Evans on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group on Shropshire Council, in respect of the Cabinet decision of 17th January 2024 regarding Shrewsbury Sports Village (SSV) Transformation.

The call-in asserts that the Cabinet decision made on 17th January is flawed for three reasons:

1. The decision to consult on the SSV proposals is a reversal of the December 2020 Policy to develop a pool at SSV followed by redevelopment of the Quarry;
2. The scope of the public consultation is proposed only regarding a new pool at SSV but should be about both options.
3. The report did not consider an option for the Smithfield development in the Town Centre. This development will have a leisure offer and some have suggested that a swimming pool and sports complex there would draw people into Shrewsbury and be attractive for those who would like to live in the town.

These issues are discussed as follows:

Issue 1 – Policy Decision

The Cabinet recommendation and subsequent decision from 17th January states:

3.1 Confirm that the previous decision made in December 2020 to develop a dual split site proposal, with new pools being developed at both the Quarry and SSV, is currently unaffordable and development of SSV needs to be prioritised, with a full assessment being undertaken in due course on the future options for the Quarry site.

Councillor Evan's call-in asserts that:

In 3.1 there is a clear reversal of the policy agreed in December 2020 to develop a pool at SSV followed by redevelopment of the Quarry which is now described as unaffordable. The decision here is to go ahead with the development of a SSV Pool on its own and the abandonment of the intention to redevelop the Quarry Pool.

The Policy Intent

The policy intent presented at Cabinet on 17th January 2024 is to ensure both that there continues to be swimming provision in Shrewsbury in the future and that there is continuity of swimming provision whilst new facilities are developed. There is a pressing need for a

replacement facility to serve Shrewsbury and the surrounding area, and the effects of inflation mean any further delays will impact the affordability of this development.

The Cabinet report was clear that a decision on the future of the Quarry has not been made and, whilst the option explored in Appendix 4 was currently considered unaffordable, the recommendations were explicit in committing to undertake an assessment of future options for the Quarry in due course. The reasons to prioritise Shrewsbury Sports Village are multifactored and include:


1. The Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre is end-of-life.
2. The need for swimming provision to be carbon neutral.
3. The need for phasing of a new pool – why Sports Village should come first.
4. Promoting swimming lessons and facilities for families and children.
5. Investing to make pools and fitness provision financially sustainable.
6. Improving accessibility.
7. Enabling swimming competitions.

These reasons are elaborated as follows:

The Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre is end of life

The Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre is 55 years of age and is at the end of its operational life. This has been the primary reason over the last 13 years for seeking Council investment in new swimming provision for Shrewsbury. Deterioration is evident in many areas and exemplified by the recent extensive repair works to the main pool ceiling and ventilation systems, at a cost of more than £400,000, but necessary to ensure the main pool was safe for public use.

The age and complexity of the building was one of the reasons the Council initially struggled to find a contractor who was willing to undertake the works. The risk of further significant building, plant and machinery failures and the need for further costly repairs is growing. The latest detailed condition survey by surveyors Faithful and Gould was updated in 2022 and reported £2.7m of immediate repairs and recommended further investigations in areas such as roof structures. Recent inspection by Council surveys have highlighted areas of concern which include issues with building movement, decay and poor condition of mechanical and electrical systems (see Annex 1). Some examples are illustrated below:

		
<p>Decay of concrete wall panels</p>	<p>Cracking and thermal movement of exterior rendering</p>	<p>Step Cracking of end wall</p>

In summary the Quarry facility is end of life and whilst essential repairs have been completed in 2023 to make the building safe, significant issues remain and new swimming facilities are required to maintain swimming provision in Shrewsbury.

The need to be carbon neutral

The Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre does not meet modern energy efficiency standards, and this combined with the fact it has a gas heating system, makes the current facility is one of the largest producers of carbon emissions in the council estate, second only to Shire Hall. When operating fully, the pool uses more than 3,500,000 kw hours of power and generates over 650,000 Kg of CO₂ per annum (See Annex 2). By contrast the new pool at Whitchurch will be very thermally efficient and is being developed with an all-electric solution which has the potential to be carbon neutral if the electricity is purchased from a renewable energy supplier.

It is proposed that the new facilities at the Sports Village should be built to BREEAM Excellent standard and would be thermally efficient to minimise heat and energy loss. The aim would be to be carbon neutral in operation, and this would be achieved by the installation of an all-electric heating system supported by photo-voltaic cells and air source heat pumps. By being all electric the operator would be able to purchase power from a renewable energy supplier making the new facility carbon neutral in operation. In addition, the development at the Sports Village would allow new EV car charging points to be installed so visitors by electric car can also be carbon neutral.

Phasing of a new Pool – why Shrewsbury Sports Village should come first

If a new pool were developed first on the Quarry site this would require demolition and re-development, meaning that there would be no swimming provision in the town for at least 2 years. Prioritising a new build pool at the Sports Village is therefore necessary before any action is taken at the Quarry site to ensure there is continuity of swimming provision in Shrewsbury.

It is correct that the Council decision in December 2020 was to investigate the feasibility of developing new pool facilities at both the Quarry and Sports Village sites with the Sports Village site being developed first to provide the continuity of pool provision. To this end, the Cabinet decision on 17th January 2024 seeks a new pool at the Sports Village. However, the Council wishes to take a phased and measured approach to these investments. This started in April 2020 by prioritising the development of a new pool in Whitchurch, now well advanced and on target to open to the public in Summer 2025. The Council wants next to prioritise the Sports Village and once this project is advanced, proposes to explore realistic and affordable options for the Quarry.

Promoting swimming lessons and better facilities for families and children

It is essential that all children are taught to swim and schools have a legal requirement to provide swimming lessons. The National Curriculum level 2 requires all school children to be able to swim 25m. A good quality and easily accessible pool is essential to enable and encourage swimming and confidence in water. The Sports Village is easily accessible by school coaches and minibuses, will have more effective heating and easily assessable steps to a new studio training pool.

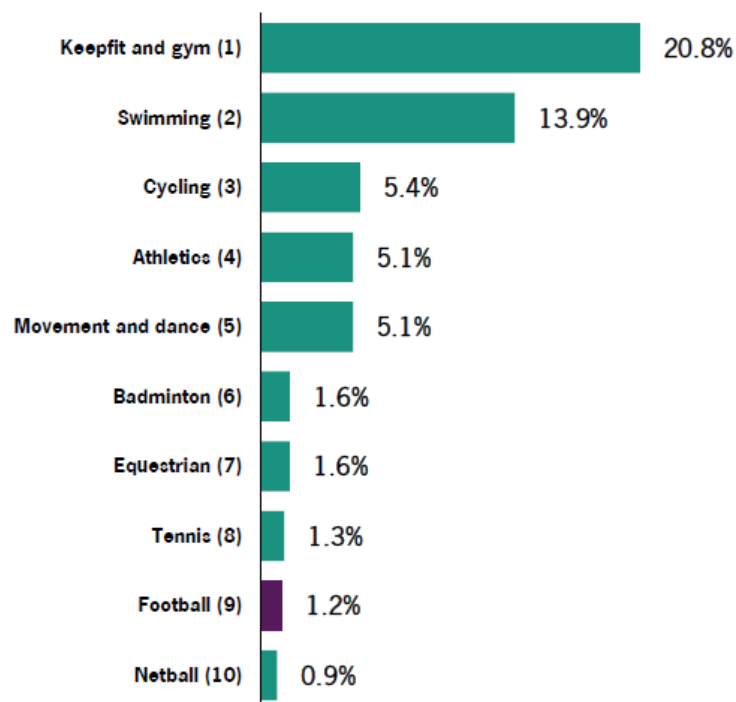
The proposal for a studio pool with a moveable floor at Sports Village would enable swimming lessons for all abilities, with easy access and new changing rooms on poolside.

The addition of a party module to the moveable floor will also allow children’s parties to be organised strengthening the young peoples’ confidence and love of swimming and water. The proposal will have a sizeable café with good views of the studio pool and access to a soft play area which will appeal to parents.

Investing to make pools and fitness provision financially sustainable

It must be stressed that the development of Shrewsbury Sports Village is not just about modern swimming provision. The current facility is not financially viable due to the limited, sports-orientated facility mix. Investment is needed to diversify the activities available, such as better facilities for gym, dance, fitness, studio cycling and soft play, to make it more appealing to the wider public and attract more revenue. The Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre and Shrewsbury Sport Village only operate now with significant financial subsidies from the Council. The levels of subsidy and other financial details have not been made publicly available due to commercial sensitivity.

The need for a more diverse facility mix to serve the community more equitably is illustrated by the following extract from a survey by the Women in Sport Foundation. This shows the sport and fitness preferences for women and girls, with a strong preference for keep fit, gym, cycling, dance and swimming (See Annex 3):



Women in Sport Foundation – Top 10 Preferred Sporting Activities for Women

Improving accessibility

In terms of disabled access, a new facility would meet disability access standards and provide much improved accessibility for people with disabilities. Notable improvements from the Sports Village proposals include:

- Level site and single storey facility;
- New disabled changing toilets and rooms and Changing Places facility
- Easy access steps to both two new pools
- Pool Pod for wheelchair users to access the pool

- Drowning detection system
- Wellness studio to enable people with mobility issues to participate in exercise programmes.

The Quarry site poses problems for people with disabilities, identified in the 2015 public consultation. The site is sloped, with limited disabled parking and built over several levels with limited disabled changing, no Changing Places facility and no easy access steps or Pool Pods.

Enabling Swimming Competitions

The Amateur Swimming Association has been pressing for a competition standard pool in Shropshire for many years. A new pool will enable the Council to meet the Swim England standards for competition pools, which would allow county standard competitions and galas to be organized in Shropshire. Currently swimming clubs in Shropshire must travel to Wolverhampton and Sandwell.

The Sports Village site would provide the opportunity to develop such a facility which requires:

- Precisely constructed 25.05 metre, 8 lane pool.
- Space in the pool hall for 500 visitors (between 250 spectators and 250 competitors).
- Raised end diving platforms.
- Score board
- Electrical timing infrastructure.
- Easily accessible site with ample parking.

In summary

For swimming provision to be maintained, and be both financially and environmentally sustainable, investment needs to be made in a new pool and associated fitness centre as a priority. The Shrewsbury Sports Village site gives the best balance of phasing and accessibility for this purpose.

Issue 2 – The Scope of the Consultation

Councillor Evans' call-in asserts that:

However, in 3.2 the public consultation will only be about “development proposals for SSV”. Surely the consultation should be about whether the public want a new pool at Sundorne or the Quarry since there is only funding for one Pool. For this reason alone, this decision should be called in so that a proper consultation can be agreed about both options.

The report also fails to acknowledge that in previous consultations there has been overwhelming support for the retention of a pool at The Quarry – close to 70% of respondents favoured this option. Past public support for the Quarry that has been clear in previous consultations should be made clear to members of the Cabinet, especially recently elected councillors from outside Shrewsbury, who may not be aware of the strong support that the Quarry received in the past. This is a second reason for the call-in.

The Policy Intent of the Cabinet Report

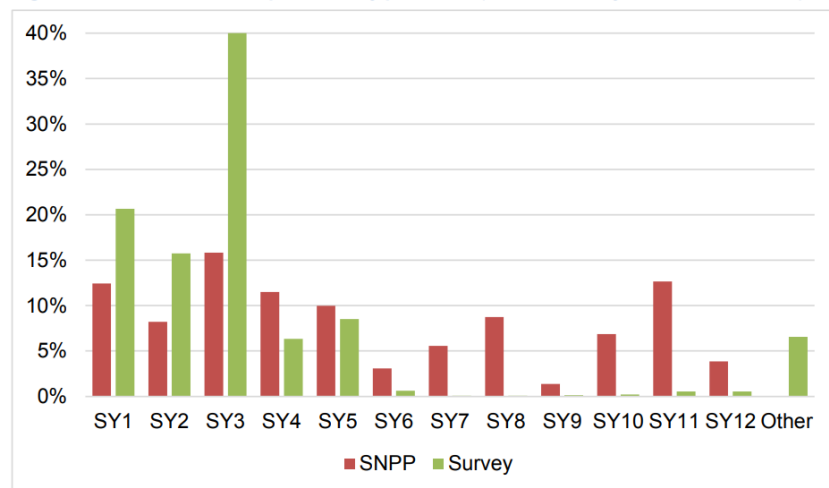
The debate regarding the future of swimming provision in Shrewsbury goes back over 13 years but has not previously yielded a viable and affordable solution. In that time the Quarry Swimming and Fitness Centre has continued to age and deteriorate, generating additional costs and significant carbon emissions, and any replacement facility has become increasingly costly due to inflation. The latest Cabinet report proposed a constructive way forward, to prioritise SSV for a new facility whilst acknowledging the public feeling for the Quarry site in stressing that no decision has been made on its future. An options appraisal for this will form a separate workstream and consultation in due course.

Summary of the last public consultation

In July 2014 Cabinet approved the commissioning of a feasibility study to look at options for replacing the Quarry pool. The study identified a range of options and sites for the future of Swimming in Shrewsbury which were put out to public consultation from 28 May 2015 to 30 October 2015. The results were presented in a report by 4Global March 2016 (see Annex 4). The high-level results of this consultation are often quoted as showing overwhelming support for the Quarry site. However, the detail within the report shows that this is not so clear cut.

The 1,467 completed responses to the consultation questionnaire which is quite high for a council consultation, albeit only 0.48% of the population (based on the 2011 census). Most responses were from Shrewsbury post codes, with the majority, 40%, being from the SY3 post code. The report states (2.2.51) that “people based in SY1-5 and especially those in SY3 are significantly over-represented”, as can be seen from the graph below.

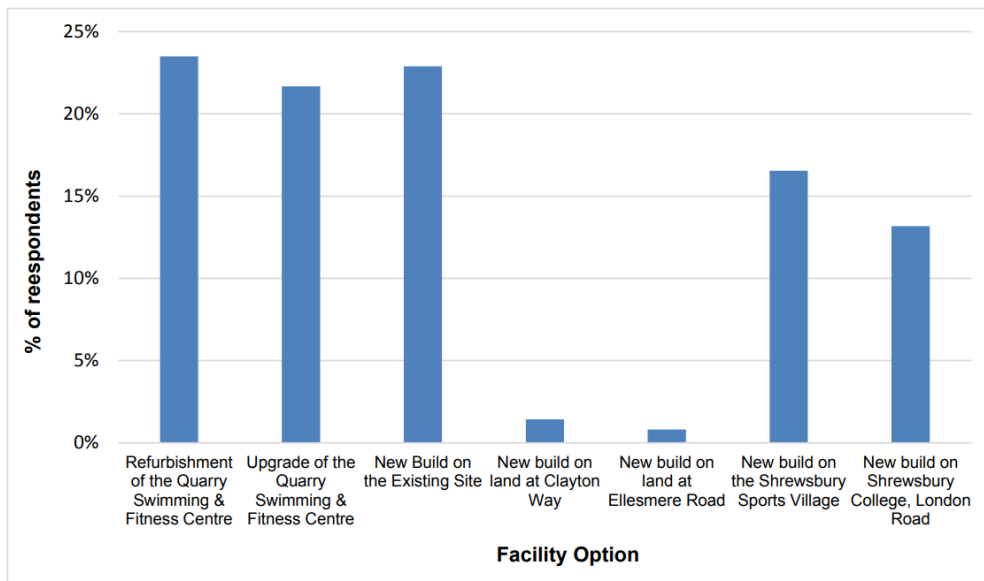
Figure 5– Distribution of Respondents by post code (Source: Survey data and ONS 2011).



Extract from SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL March 2016 by 4Global (page 15)

A breakdown of the preferences from the 1,482 respondents showed 23.45% preferred Quarry pool refurbishment, 22.89% preferred a new pool on the Quarry site and 21.67% preferred to upgrade the Quarry. The value often quoted that that 68% preferred a Quarry based solution aggregates the results for these three different Quarry based options, but with no consensus on which option. The preference for an SSV development was the fourth preferred option backed by 16.54% of responses.

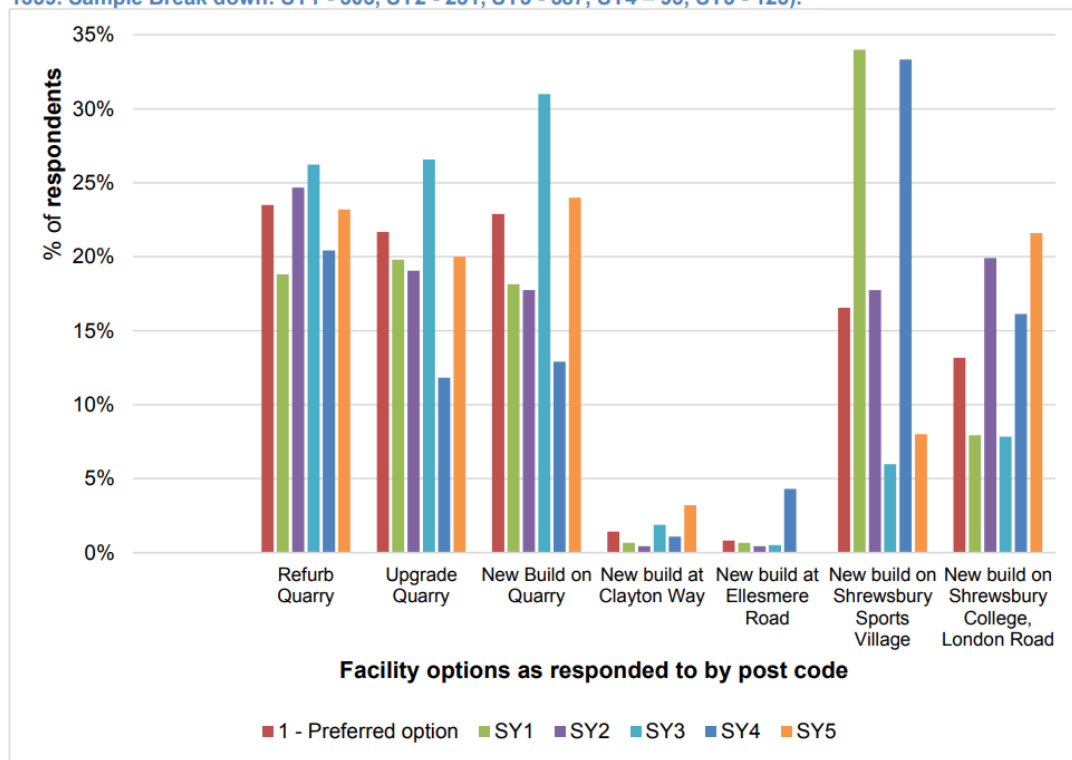
Figure 12 - Distribution of first preference rankings per facility option (Source: Survey data. Sample size: 1481).



Extract from SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL March 2016 by 4Global (page 25)

However, we know that respondents from SY3 are significantly overrepresented in the responses, and if the responses to the options are looked at by post code a less clear picture emerges.

Figure 18- 1st Option Preferences by Post Code (Source: Survey data. Total Sample Size: 1339. Sample Break down: SY1 - 303, SY2 - 231, SY3 - 587, SY4 - 93, SY5 - 125).

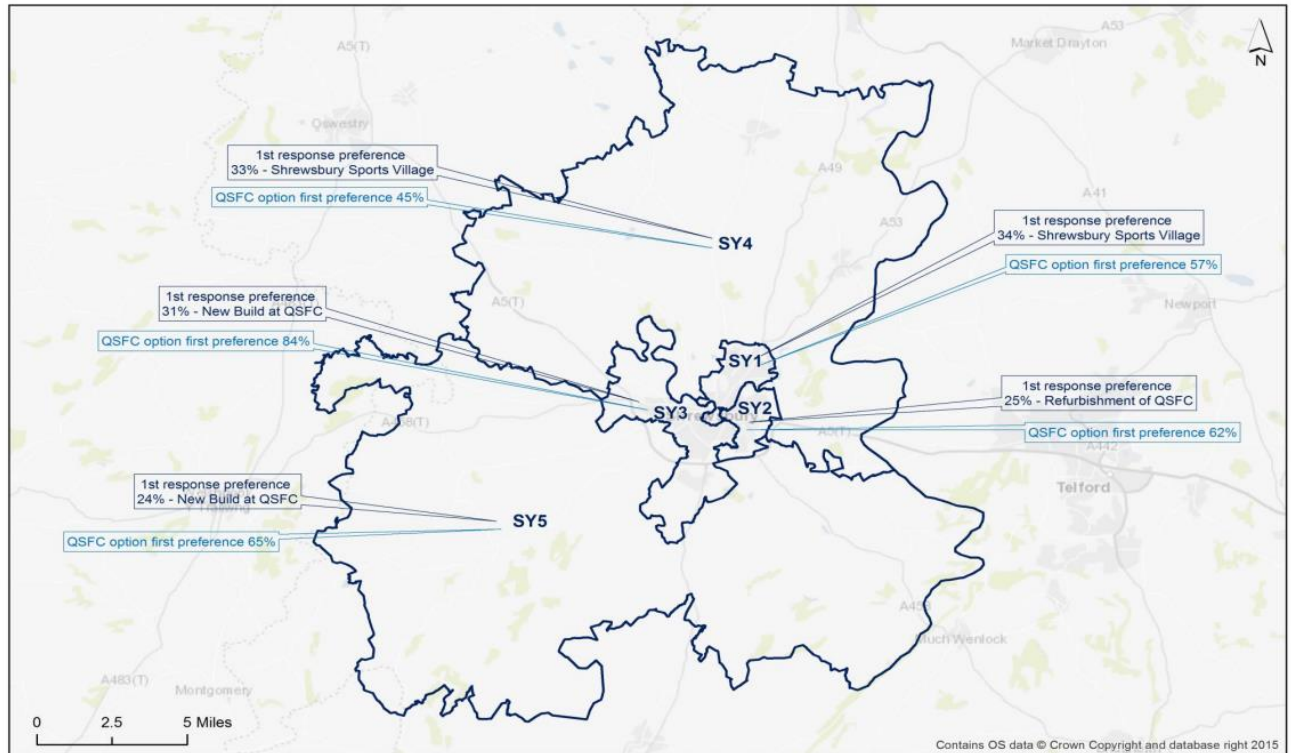


Extract from SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL March 2016 by 4Global (page 36)

The results show that post codes in the South of Shrewsbury (SY2 and SY3) show a marked preference for a Quarry location – but those respondents in the North (SY1 and SY4) show a

marked preference for a Sports Village location. In fact, the responses for a new build at Sports Village by SY1 and SY4 respondents are significantly the most popular options.

Figure 19- First preference responses by post code area (Source: Survey data. Total Sample Size: 1339. Sample Break down: SY1 - 303, SY2 - 231, SY3 - 587, SY4 - 93, SY5 - 125).



Extract from SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL March 2016 by 4Global (page 37)

In summary respondents from the south of Shrewsbury preferred a Quarry location for a pool and people in the north preferred the Sports Village location. Regular swimmers preferred to see the Quarry refurbished, non-swimmers would prefer a new build at the Sundorne location. Responses by age also showed differing preferences with young people preferring dry side activities and 30-44 years being less interested in a town centre location. This is a complex set of issues and the report by 4Global made the following conclusions from looking at the detailed data:

Key Findings from the Detailed Data and Cross Tabular Analysis

- The level of confidence in the reliability of cross tabular analysis was often under the required threshold due to small sample size amongst some demographics
- Respondents from postcode SY3 were more likely to place one of the QSFC options as their first preference.
- Respondents from SY1 and SY4 were more likely to prefer the option at the Shrewsbury Sports Village.
- The closer to the middle of the age categories the smaller the disparity in first choice preferences between the top five options.
- The most popular option for 30-44 year olds is the New Build at QSFC Pool
- In the 45-59 category only a 2% margin separates the three QSFC based options (Refurbishment being the most popular with 24%).
- The respondents that swam regularly (once per week or more) were more likely to have preferred the Refurbish or Upgrade options of the QSFC Pool
- The respondents that swam less or infrequently were more likely to prefer the options at Shrewsbury Village or Shrewsbury College.
- Younger respondents were far more likely to consider the facility elements of a 'Gym', 'Sports hall' or 'outdoor games area/pitches' on site than any other age group.
- 30-44 year olds placed less importance on the town centre location than any other age group.

Extract from SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL March 2016 by 4Global (page 44)

Social media reaction

There has been a strong but mixed social media reaction to the press coverage of the latest Cabinet decision and the associated call in. The Shropshire Star article on 10 January 2024 reporting that the Cabinet was prioritising a new pool at the Sports Village received a strong positive reaction on Facebook; with 122 reactions: 95 positive and 23 negative (see below). Conversely, the Shropshire Star article on 26 January 2024 reporting the call-in and highlighting that the plans would receive further scrutiny also received a strong positive reaction on Facebook; with 125 reactions, 104 giving a positive reaction for the call-in and only 10 negative reactions. These examples further demonstrate the division in public opinion.



Like Comment Send Share

All 122 91 20 4 2 1

Like Comment Send Share

All 125 106 10 4 2 2 1

Copies of recent social media coverage and public reactions

Summary

The evidence shows that there are strong feelings for both retaining swimming at the Quarry and developing new facilities at the Sports Village. As described above, there is a need to prioritise the new swimming facilities at the Sports Village and the Cabinet report has recommended a consultation on these proposals. The questionnaire will assess how much support the public has for the proposal and will invite alternative views. It was stressed in the Cabinet report, however, that no decision has been made on the future of the Quarry. A full options appraisal will be conducted and consulted on once the SSV plans are underway.

Issue 3 – Omission of Riverside as an option

Councillor Evans’ call-in asserts that:

A third reason for a call-in is an option that was not even considered in the report to Cabinet. At the core of the Smithfield development in the Town Centre will be a leisure offer and some have suggested that a swimming pool and sports complex on this site would draw people into town and also be attractive for those who would like to live in town.

Historic options

The report to Cabinet prioritised a new facility at SSV before committing to look at future options for the Quarry. This is consistent with the policy development over the past 10 years which has narrowed down the options to these two sites. At no time in recent years has the Council looked at an option to develop a new pool and fitness facilities at other sites such as the Riverside. Such a step would be a new policy direction and would further delay decision making.

The last public consultation in 2015 consultation looked at several sites, including:

1. Refurbishing the Quarry
2. Upgrading the Quarry
3. New Build at the Quarry
4. New Build at Clayton Way
5. New build at Ellesmere Road
6. New Build at Shrewsbury Sports Village
7. New Build at London Road

Neither the results of the consultation nor associated feasibility raised the prospect of Riverside offering an alternative site option.

Feasibility considerations

Previously the timescales for resolving new Swimming provisions were so far ahead of the Riverside planning that this option has not been considered. However, the delay to the decision on Swimming in Shrewsbury has meant that Riverside has partially caught up with the Swimming in Shrewsbury programme. Any proposal for a new pool and associated fitness provision at Riverside would be dependent upon feasibility reports, designs, business case approvals, planning approval and the phasing of other construction activities on the site, given the confined nature and restricted access to the site. This would add many years and additional costs to the swimming in Shrewsbury debate.

Initial feedback from the Riverside project team raised several considerations:

- Flood Risk - Riverside site sits within Flood Zone 3 and has poor ground conditions. A new facility on the site would need to be raised out of the flood zone adding significantly to the construction cost.
- Aesthetics - The site is in a conservation area, and so it is important to create a massing and aesthetic that fits the Riverside. A pool tank raised above the flood zone will create large areas of façade.
- Financial Viability – Swimming pools on their own are rarely financially viable and need to be developed alongside more financially viable uses such as gyms and studios. This would therefore take up a large footprint of the Riverside site.
- Opportunity Cost - A swimming pool on Riverside would take up most of the Phase 1 development area. Whilst Shropshire Council plans to anchor the development with the Multi Agency Hub, Plots 5 and 6 are currently intended to be private developer led. A swimming pool and associated fitness facilities would remove this opportunity and significantly impact upon the financial viability of Riverside proposals.

Conclusions

The Cabinet report sought to address the pressing need to plan the replacement of Shrewsbury's aging swimming facilities at the Quarry. It recognized that there is strong support for the Quarry site and made clear that no decision was being made about the future of the Quarry. But if swimming provision is to be maintained and be financially and environmentally sustainable investment needs to be made in a new Pool and associated fitness centre as a priority – the Sundorne site provided the best balance of phasing and accessibility for this purpose.

The last public consultation on Swimming in Shrewsbury was held in 2015 and showed strong feelings for both retaining swimming at the Quarry and developing new facilities at the Sports Village. For this reason, the Cabinet report recommended a revised consultation on the proposal to prioritize the Sports Village. The questionnaire will assess how much support the public has for the proposal and will invite alternative views.

The debate about how and where to locate future swimming provision has run for over 13 years and has narrowed down the debate to two sites – the Quarry and Sports Village. It would be retrogressive to re-open the debate again by looking at the Riverside development at this stage. The compound effects of inflation over this time have doubled the costs of new facilities. A further delay to the decision risks the Council losing the opportunity to develop a new pool which would meet the needs of Shrewsbury and the County for the next 40 years.

The Committee is asked to look at the evidence and reaffirm the decisions made at Cabinet on 17th December 2023 that were to:

- 3.1. Confirm that the previous decision made in December 2020 to develop a dual split site proposal, with new pools being developed at both the Quarry and SSV, is currently unaffordable and development of SSV needs to be prioritised, with a full assessment being undertaken in due course on the future options for the Quarry site.
- 3.2. Authorise an 8-week public consultation on the development proposals for SSV, including a competition standard pool and studio pool and improvements to the fitness centre.
- 3.3. Agree that once the public consultation is completed, the results are to be reported back to Cabinet and then Full Council for a decision on whether to amend the proposals and/ or to proceed with the capital funding for the design and construction of the SSV facilities.

Annexes:

1. Summary report on the Condition of the Quarry Pool
2. Calculation of Carbon emissions (Quarry, Sports Village and Proposal)
3. Fact Sheet – Women Sport and Fitness Foundation
4. SHREWSBURY SWIMMING POOL – Consultation results - March 2016 by 4Global