



Committee and Date
Cabinet 4 December 2024

Item

Public



Leisure Service Review Consultation

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):		Councillor Rob Macey, Culture & Digital	

1. Synopsis

Shropshire Council’s Medium-Term Financial Strategy requires changes to leisure provision to create financial savings. This report outlines options for changes to provision at Much Wenlock Leisure Centre and seeks approval to initiate public consultation on the proposals.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report sets out the rationale for Shropshire Council to serve notice upon 3-18 Education Trust, ceasing to operate Much Wenlock Leisure Centre and withdraw subsidy for community use, contributing to Leisure savings identified in the MTFS. This would lead either to the centre no longer being operated by Shropshire Council for community use or a reduction in community provision, subject to options to be explored with the Education Trust for alternative approaches to management of the centre.
- 2.2 The Council’s financial challenges require consideration of priorities for spend, including reviewing all service areas that are discretionary, and exploring ways in which to deliver services in a more financially sustainable manner. This proposal will support the Council’s Healthy Organisation priority.

- 2.3 Much Wenlock Leisure Centre is a joint-use facility integral to William Brookes School. It is owned by the William Brookes Academy Trust, a charity and company limited by guarantee. In April 2021 the school joined the 3-18 Education Trust, a Multi Academy Trust with nine schools.
- 2.4 Shropshire Council operates and manages the leisure centre on behalf of the Trust to provide community use when the facility is not in use for education purposes. This arrangement has been in place since 2010 when the facility re-opened following a school rebuild. The Council's operational budget for this facility in 2024/25 is £280,040.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet is requested to:

- Authorise an 8-week public consultation on options for the future of the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre, including the proposal to serve notice to 3-18 Education Trust to cease to operate Much Wenlock Leisure Centre on behalf of William Brookes School and withdraw the associated subsidy for community use.
- Agree that once the public consultation is completed, the results are reported back to Cabinet for a decision on the preferred option.

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 Leisure provision is discretionary service not a duty, but it is supported by the Council to promote the health and wellbeing of the community and to fulfil the compulsory element of the primary school national curriculum for swimming and water safety.
- 4.2 For leisure centres to be financially viable they require a level of local usage, which also relies upon a good quality facility to attract customers. Much Wenlock Leisure Centre would require further investment to improve its market appeal and support greater public use.
- 4.3 Shropshire Council supports 12 leisure centres across the county, 10 of which are managed by external providers funded by Shropshire Council. Whilst informal discussions have been held with potential operators for Much Wenlock Leisure Centre, on behalf of the William Brookes School, it has not previously been considered a sufficiently financially viable option to appeal to them.
- 4.4 Subject to approval by Cabinet, it is therefore proposed to initiate an 8-week public consultation, extended from the minimum 6 weeks to take account of the Christmas and New Year break, on options for the future of the leisure centre, including the proposal that the Council ceases to operate Much Wenlock Leisure

Centre on behalf of the William Brookes School and withdraws the associated subsidy for community use.

4.5 The local Councillor for Much Wenlock has been advised of the proposals and his views will be included in the report back to Cabinet in due course.

4.6 Risk narrative

- Should the proposal for Shropshire Council to withdraw subsidy and cease to operate Much Wenlock Leisure Centre not be approved by Cabinet the required savings identified in the MTFS will not be delivered.
- Were due process not followed in consulting upon the proposed changes, this could result in a successful challenge to the proposal, and a failure to deliver the necessary savings.

1.1 Risk table

Risk	Mitigations
Proposal to serve notice and consult on changes to service provision not approved and identified savings are not met.	Identify savings elsewhere within the Leisure service budget or other service budgets, which will result in facility closure, reduction, or services losses elsewhere.
Challenge to due process resulting in delays to implementation.	Public consultation process and requirements have been established and will be adopted.

4.7 An Equalities, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) has been completed to ensure that the impact of the proposed change is understood and will be mitigated where possible and is attached at Appendix 1. This will be updated following the proposed public consultation and reported to Cabinet with the consultation findings.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on 29 February 2024 and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet monthly. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year and beyond to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve:

- scaling down initiatives,
- changing the scope,
- delaying implementation, or
- extending delivery timescales.

- 5.2 Serving notice to the 3-18 Education Trust and the subsequent withdrawal of subsidy and management services from Much Wenlock Leisure Centre could only take place following formal public consultation. The notice period to the Trust is 12 months. As a result, in the event the proposal is eventually approved, the cost savings of £280,040 per annum are not predicted until the financial year 2026/27.
- 5.3 A Sport England funding agreement relating to the construction of the facility is in place until 2031. Should public access be significantly reduced, Shropshire Council, as the original recipient of capital funding of £1,008,000, will be liable to repay a proportion of that capital. The exact amount reclaimed will be subject to negotiation, depending on the level of future public access to the facility and reflecting the fact that 15 years of the 21-year agreement have elapsed.
- 5.4 Should the proposal to cease operation and subsidy of Much Wenlock Leisure Centre not be approved, it would be necessary to explore alternative service reductions or losses to provide savings of a similar order. This would likely result in delayed delivery of savings, due to the need for further consultations, notice periods, and negotiations with contractors.
- 5.5 The Council continues to explore additional routes to deliver increased income and reduced costs in the leisure budget to deliver its necessary MTFs savings, which will be the subject of further reporting in due course.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1 Serving notice to the 3-18 Education Trust and withdrawal of management services at Much Wenlock Leisure Centre may result in reduction in community use. Those attending swimming lessons and utilising the swimming pool are therefore likely to travel further afield to access similar facilities, resulting in a probable increase in vehicle emissions.

7. Background

- 7.1 Shropshire Council's Leisure Services contribute to the delivery of The Shropshire Plan in the following ways:
- Healthy People - Leisure Services promote the physical and mental health of Shropshire residents, giving opportunities for physical activity, learning, and social interaction, reducing the risk of chronic disease and improving mental well-being.
 - Healthy Economy - Leisure Services contribute to Shropshire's economic vitality by attracting visitors, supporting businesses, and creating jobs. They generate income for the local economy, support the growth of the tourism and leisure sectors, and provide employment and career opportunities for young people.
 - Healthy Environment - Leisure Services promote environmental awareness and responsibility, implementing measures to reduce their environmental impact and encouraging the use of sustainable modes of transport. Local provision of leisure services around the county reduces travel distances and encourages active travel.
 - Healthy Organization - Leisure Services work with multiple internal and external partners to support the delivery of services to residents and providing opportunities for early intervention activities. Leisure Services support demand management,

reducing the need for direct social care by encouraging healthier active lifestyles, tackling social isolation, and strengthening community support networks.

7.2 The three principal strategies covering Shropshire Leisure Services are:

- Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy – Updated 2024
- Indoor Leisure Facilities Strategy 2020-2038
- Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Strategy 2021-3021

7.3 The core principles of the Indoor Facilities Strategy are:

- Support for the creation of a high quality and sustainable indoor leisure facility mix, which provides accessible and inclusive activities for all Shropshire residents leading to increased participation and active lifestyles, thereby meeting community need.
- Recognising the importance of leisure facilities as relevant community spaces, accessible to all and offering opportunities for the delivery of a wide range of activities, services, support and entertainment to local communities and people.
- A commitment to work with a wide range of partner organisations and individuals as co-creators and co-deliverers of leisure facilities so that they best reflect the differing needs of local communities.

7.4 These strategic principles remain important but must now be interpreted within the context of the Council's financial constraints, with necessary changes to provision across a wide range of services now required to meet budgetary limits.

7.5 The Much Wenlock Leisure Centre is a joint-use facility located at William Brookes School. The facility is operated by Shropshire Council for community use, but it is owned by William Brookes Academy Trust, which is part of the 3-18 Education Trust.

7.6 The centre is a relatively modern wet and dry leisure centre. Constructed as part of the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme, with £1,008,000 funding from Sport England, it was completed in 2010. As a "joint use" centre, the school/academy has exclusive use of the facility during school hours. Outside school hours it is available for community use for 56.25 hours each week. This varies during school holidays according to demand.

7.7 The facility mix is:

- Swimming pool (25m x 12.5m)
- Multi-purpose sports hall (33m x 18m) with four courts
- 20-station fitness suite
- Gymnasium (15m x 10.5m)
- Associated Changing Rooms
- Artificial turf pitch - (63m x 102m not floodlit)
- Grass pitches (not floodlit)
- 200m athletics track, 100m straight and long jump pit (not floodlit)
- Multi Use Games Area (floodlit tarmac)

- 7.8 Some areas of the centre are in poor condition, do not meet customer expectations and have contributed to reduced usage and income generation. Issues include:
- Changing rooms are in poor condition e.g. damaged lockers, ceiling tiles damaged, damaged electrical accessories/sockets, etc.
 - Redecoration is required throughout, and tiles are missing/damaged.
 - Swimming pool changing room floor needs replacing.
 - Swimming pool showers are ineffective and need replacing.
 - Fitness suite equipment is old and in poor condition.
 - First floor pool viewing gallery flooring needs replacing.
 - Athletics track needs resurfacing to bring up to standard
 - Multi-Use Games Area used for tennis/netball needs upgrading.
 - Vinyl surfacing needs replacement or upgrading in dry changing.
 - Ageing pool plant room requires investment.
- 7.9 The Academy is responsible for the repairs and maintenance of the centre and procuring utility suppliers. Shropshire Council engages a specialist contractor to maintain the swimming pool plant. Costs for repairs, maintenance and utility supply are split evenly between Shropshire Council and the Academy.
- 7.10 Shropshire Council currently employs 4.1 FTE staff at the centre who would be subject to compulsory redundancy if service provision changes or the centre closes because of the Council serving notice to the academy.
- 7.11 Performance indicators for Much Wenlock Leisure Centre show the following usage of the facility:
- Number of visits 2023/24 – 72,849 (swimming pool closed for 3 months due to filter replacement). 2022/23 – 102,597.
 - 300 children attending swimming lessons.
 - 7 primary schools use the swimming pool.
 - 73 leisure centre members pay by direct debit.
 - 90% of visits are made from within 10 miles
 - 70% of visits are related to the swimming pool; 11% to the sports hall; 6% to the fitness suite.
- 7.12 The total population within a 10-mile radius is approximately 200,000. The catchment area for Much Wenlock town covers the town itself and stretches westwards towards Church Stretton and eastwards towards Broseley. The closest alternative leisure facilities to Much Wenlock are:
- Abraham Darby Sports and Leisure Centre – 7.1 miles
 - Bridgnorth Endowed Leisure Centre – 8.7 miles
 - Oakengates Leisure Centre – 10.2 miles
 - Wellington Civic and Leisure Centre – 11.1 miles
 - Quarry Swimming & Fitness Centre, Shrewsbury 13.8 miles.
- 7.13 The Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment undertaken with regard to the proposal to cease to operate and subsidise Much Wenlock Leisure Centre for community use has assessed that the likely impact is low to medium negative across all nine Protected Characteristic groupings as set out in the Equality Act 2010, as all current users of the centre will potentially be affected by

the proposed service change. This assessment will be updated following consultation to take account of the responses received.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1 William Brookes School/Academy Trust is keen to explore continuing to provide community use of the leisure centre should Shropshire Council cease operating at the end of a 12-month notice period.
- 8.2 The notice period would enable the school/academy to explore suitable operating models and investigate the potential for acquiring funding to support community use of the centre and capital investment to improve the facility.
- 8.3 The Council serving notice and withdrawing management services and funding would not automatically result in the removal of community use. The decision would rest with the William Brookes Academy and their parent trust, 3-18 Education Trust.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 The provision of community use at Much Wenlock Leisure Centre is expensive and the facility requires capital investment to enable that expense to be reduced. This is not a Shropshire Council owned facility, and it is the responsibility of the Education Trust which owns the school to consider prioritisation of this investment. As things stand it is therefore not likely that the Council would continue to operate or support the service financially.
- 9.2 Providing community use of leisure facilities is a not a duty, it is a discretionary service. The Council's priority is to maintain mandatory services such as social care, highways maintenance and waste services, which are essential services for keeping residents safe.
- 9.3 It is critical that Shropshire Council secures its future financial sustainability and therefore difficult proposals to generate savings through withdrawing from service provision such as this must be considered.
- 9.4 Following the conclusion of the planned consultation process, all those responses received will be reviewed and considered before a further recommendation on the future of the Council's funding for this facility is made to a future meeting of Cabinet in the New Year.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member: Councillor Dan Thomas, Much Wenlock

Appendices

Appendix 1 Equalities, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment