



Committee and Date
Cabinet 5 March 2025

Item

Public



Management Arrangements at Much Wenlock Leisure Centre

Responsible Officer:		Jane Trethewey, Assistant Director Homes and Communities	
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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):		Councillor Robert Macey, Culture and Digital	

1. Synopsis

This report outlines savings identified within the authority's medium term financial strategy at Much Wenlock Leisure Centre and presents a summary of the recent consultation exercise, with a recommendation for the future management of the facility.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report updates Cabinet on the outcome of consultation upon Shropshire Council serving notice on 3-18 Education Trust to cease to operate Much Wenlock Leisure Centre and withdraw subsidy for community use, contributing to Leisure savings identified in the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). It recommends that the Council proceeds to serve notice upon the Trust. This would lead to the centre no longer being operated by Shropshire Council for community use, and potential reduction in community provision, subject to options to be explored with the Education Trust for capital investment and 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 therefore 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 currently 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 reopened following a school rebuild. The Council's operational budget for this facility in 2025/26 is £267,210

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That notice is served upon the 3-18 Education Trust by 31st March 2025 of the Council's intention to transfer operational responsibility for Much Wenlock Leisure Centre over to them at the expiry of the year's notice.
- 3.2. That the Council continues its engagement in dialogue with the William Brookes School, 3-18 Academy Trust and other key stakeholders to explore options for capital investment to support the shared ambition to retain public use of the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre on expiry of the Council's revenue subsidy, in support of which the Council will seek to secure capital investment funding to assist in ensuring continued public use and the smooth transition to a new operator.

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. Cabinet approval is therefore sought to serve notice on the 13-18 Educational Trust, to cease the Council's operation of the leisure centre and withdraw the associated subsidy for community use.

- 4.5. The local Councillor for Much Wenlock has been advised of the proposals. Discussions have also taken place with Much Wenlock Town Council, to support the consideration of alternative options for continued community access to the facility. The Council is committed to continuing discussion with the school and other local stakeholders to explore options for capital investment to support a viable long term public access arrangement, and will endeavour to secure a funding towards this.
- 4.6. 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.
- 4.7. **Risk table**

Risks are summarised in the table below, firstly for the option of not serving notice on the Education Trust and continuing Council subsidy and management of the Leisure Centre, and secondly for the option of serving notice and withdrawing management and subsidy from 2026-27.

Risk	Likelihood	Consequence	Mitigation
Option 1 - Not Serving Notice			
Unable to meet MTFS savings Target	Certain	Financial pressure	Identify savings elsewhere within the Leisure service budget or other service budgets, requiring facility closure, reduction, or services losses elsewhere.
Centre requires capital investment	Certain	Difficult to keep operating the service with the facility and equipment in its current condition	Asset review undertaken identifying capital investment needs.
Option 2 - Serving Notice			
Were the facility to close because of funding withdrawal there is an anticipated negative impact upon people in Protected Characteristic groupings as defined in the Equality Act 2010.	Likely	People would have to travel further to access leisure options. Some may choose to cease or reduce their indoor leisure activities, with consequent impact upon their physical and mental health and well being	An initial ESHIA was produced to assess the impact of potential facility closure ahead of public consultation. A follow up ESHIA is presented with this Cabinet report, to set out the likely impacts in the light of feedback, along with actions envisaged to mitigate negative impacts

Academy may be unable to continue offering the same level of Public Access	Almost Certain	Contradicts the objectives of the Shropshire Plan	Work will continue with the Academy Trust and the Town Council to support alternative management arrangements to sustain some public access. The withdrawal of subsidy will make this challenging. The Academy Trust has experience of operating swimming & leisure facilities at other sites.
The Academy may not be able to continue employing staff.	Likely	Loss of skilled staff. Shropshire Council would be liable for redundancy costs.	Working with the Academy Trust to support them developing an alternative operating model to retain some leisure provision. The withdrawal of subsidy will make this challenging.
Significant changes to the level of public access offered.	Almost Certain	Under the terms of the original funding agreement from Sport England, some funding may need to be repaid.	The level of refund would be dependent on the level of public sport provision retained. Working with the Academy Trust to support them developing an alternative operating model to retain some leisure provision. The withdrawal of subsidy will make this challenging.
It may be difficult to progress with essential maintenance.	Likely	The condition of the centre may reduce customer usage and income.	Working with the Academy Trust to manage the transition to the new management arrangements.
The condition of equipment and facility making the site unattractive to alternative operators	Certain	Unable to transfer to an alternative operator	The Academy Trust has been unable to find an alternative operator willing to take on the site.
Challenge to due process resulting in delays to implementation	Unlikely	Delays	An appropriate public consultation process and requirements were established and have been followed.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on 29 February 2024 and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year 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. Council withdrawal of subsidy and management services from Much Wenlock Leisure Centre could only take place following service of 12 months' notice on the 3-18 Education Trust. However, the transfer could be brought forward by negotiation if required by the school. Should Cabinet approve the proposal, the savings of £267,210 per annum will arise in the financial year 2026/27.
- 5.3. The forecast cost to the Council for delivering this facility in 2024/25 is £316,341. The projected income for 2024/25 is £162,252, which is similar to the previous year but well below the target income of £201,510. The inability to reach the income target is likely to continue into 2025/26 and will require additional savings to be considered.
- 5.4. There are 4 employees and several casual staff who would be affected. This equates to 4.1 FTE Posts. The worst-case scenario for redundancy costs is estimated to be around £17,000.
- 5.5. A Sport England funding agreement relating to the construction of the facility is in place until 2031. Should public access be significantly reduced such that there was no longer regular availability to non-school users, Shropshire Council, as the original recipient of capital funding of £1,008,000, would be liable to repay a proportion of that capital, estimated to be in the region of £275K. The exact amount reclaimed would 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 would have elapsed.
- 5.6. 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.
- 5.7. The potential to identify capital investment to support future public access of the Much Wenlock facility, allowing it to operate thereafter without ongoing revenue subsidy from the Council, must be subject to detailed review. Opportunities to draw in CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funding, or source other capital will

be explored, along with confirmation of the long term viability of the facility following such an injection of funding.

- 5.8. 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 on 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 the

- Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy – Updated 2024
- Indoor Leisure Facilities Strategy 2020-2038
- Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Strategy 2021-3021 7.3

- 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 held on a 125-year lease by William Brookes Academy Trust, which is part of the 3-18 Education Trust.

7.6. William Brookes School was rebuilt in 2010. The new campus included a leisure centre with the following facilities:

- Swimming pool (25m x 12.5m)
- Multi-purpose sports hall with four courts
- 20-station fitness suite
- Gymnasium
- Artificial turf pitch
- 200m athletics track, 100m straight and long jump pit
- Multi-Use Games area

7.7. Some areas of the centre are in poor condition, do not meet customer expectations and have contributed to reduced usage and income generation. 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.

7.8. 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.

7.9. 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.

7.10. 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.

7.11. Ahead of the public consultation, an initial Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) was undertaken on the proposal to cease to operate and subsidise Much Wenlock Leisure Centre for community use. It assessed the likely impact as low to medium negative across all nine Protected Characteristic groupings under the Equality Act 2010, as all current users of the centre are potentially affected by the proposed service change. A follow up ESHIA has now been carried out, which references the consultation responses and records consideration of the anticipated impacts in the light of the feedback from the consultation.

7.12. The overall impacts are now considered to be medium negative across the nine groupings and for the additional categories that we seek to have due regard to in Shropshire, i.e. social inclusion, veterans and serving members of the armed forces and their families, and young people leaving care. The consultation drew responses across groupings and demographics and so reflects considerations about the circumstances in which people may find themselves, including challenges of access to services and facilities in a large and rural county. It does need to be articulated that social inclusion is not a statutory grouping for which to have 'due regard'. Neither are socio-economic considerations, albeit these may yet come into force in secondary legislation. Government guidance (November 2023) is clear that decisions may still be taken where a negative equality impact has been identified, provided that due consideration has been given and that mitigation efforts are being made, and that there will be ongoing engagement with groupings affected.

7.13. Proposals to change the management and subsidy arrangements for the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre were subject to the public consultation for a period of eight weeks. There was a high level of community engagement with 1,770 responses to the online consultation survey and 49 written consultation responses. A full report on the outcome of the consultation is provided at Appendix 1.

7.14. The consultation presented 2 options: -

Option 1: Shropshire Council ceases operating Much Wenlock Leisure Centre for community use. This could result in a reduction of community use of the centre when operations become the responsibility of William Brookes School. Savings would be achieved.

Option 2: Do nothing, making no savings achieved. Additional savings would need to be found from other services elsewhere.

7.15 The council recommended Option 1. However, the community response showed little support for this, with most respondents (78%) preferring Option 2, while 15% did not answer. The Much Wenlock Leisure Consultation report reveals a strong community attachment to the leisure centre and many concerns about its potential closure. Feedback highlighted the importance of the centre for the health, wellbeing, and social cohesion of the local community. It also flagged the need to consider alternative options to ensure the sustainability of the leisure centre.

7.16 Key themes within the feedback from the consultation responses included the following:

- **Community Concerns:** the leisure centre has significance as a community facility, with many individuals reporting its positive impact, as well as benefits for social cohesion and reducing isolation.
- **Impact on Clubs and Groups:** ending public access to the leisure centre would affect local clubs and groups that rely on it for their activities, including sports clubs, swimming lessons, and other groups.
- **Impact on children and young people:** both adults and children responded to highlight concerns about the impact on children, noting the benefits they obtain from being involved in sport and clubs including confidence, making friends and social connections and the opportunity to learn skills and compete.
- **Impact on Health and Wellbeing:** The leisure centre is seen as a vital resource for promoting physical and mental health, with potential closure having a negative impact on their health and wellbeing. It was suggested that initial financial savings will see other costs increase over time as health and wellbeing impacts become evident.
- **Economic Impact:** Many felt that loss of this facility would make the area less attractive to live, work and bring up families, with some comments focused on a potential for job losses to result.
- **Lack of alternative provision:** A common theme was that other leisure centres will not be accessible to many due to distance, lack of public transport or cost concerns.
- **Criticism of Consultation Options:** Respondents criticised the limited options presented in the consultation, with neither of the two options being popular with some of the community.
- **Suggestions for Investment and Improvement:** Alternative suggestions were proposed for improving management and marketing to increase usage and revenue. These included better maintenance, extended opening hours, and more community involvement. Some suggested Shropshire Council's management of the centre has led to decline. Others suggested that a lack of experienced staff was an issue. There was a call to consider options such as capital investment,

seeking alternative funding, using volunteers, considering private or charity management and exploring options to partner with other organisations.

- **Criticism of Shropshire Council decision making:** Shropshire Council's investment in other leisure provision in Shropshire whilst suggesting savings in Much Wenlock was criticised. Many expressed the concern that the leisure centre is one of the few public facilities they have access to in the locality and questioned the value of their council tax for the community.

7.17. It is recognised that the limited options set out in the consultation result from the necessity to secure Council savings, and that, whilst engaging with the school as the facility owner, the complexity of design and access issues at this site have prevented alternative solutions from being developed at this stage.

7.18 However, the proposed service of notice on the school leaves a full year before the Council acts to secure revenue savings from the Much Wenlock site. This provides ample opportunity for the Council to continue dialogue with the school and other stakeholders, exploring potential sources of capital investment, testing the feasibility of different management options, and addressing the range of comments and suggestions provided through the consultation process.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. The William Brookes School has been in discussion with alternative leisure management companies to explore options for the future management of the facility. However, this has not yet provided a viable solution to the future operation of the centre for public access.
- 8.2. The school is aware of the need for capital investment to remodel its facility to enable it to be more easily operated for public access. However, the school's finances have not to date allowed for this investment, given the priority it must place upon its education duties.
- 8.3. Should the school be unable to source an operator to manage the facility in a financially viable manner, or operate it in-house, this could well result in its closure to the public. In this event, Shropshire Council would likely be required to refund a proportion of its original Sport England grant funding.
- 8.4. Critical to the Council's proposal to serve notice on withdrawing subsidy and management from this site rather than other leisure facilities elsewhere in the county is that it is a facility owned by the school through a 125-year lease from the Council. It is therefore not an asset for which the Council has responsibility for repair, maintenance and ongoing investment during this lease term. Consequently, the Council cannot easily make changes to support the revenue or long-term success of a facility over which it has no direct control.
- 8.5. This is a unique arrangement and is not replicated in other Shropshire leisure facilities where the council either operates its own facility or contracts others to do so on its behalf.
- 8.6. School access arrangements at the facility restrict its opening hours to the public. The layout of the centre means that it is physically integrated into the school

building and, for safeguarding reasons, cannot be used for public access during the school day. This limits operational flexibility significantly and prevents a more commercial approach that would otherwise support the viability of the facility, in the way that other leisure centres can achieve.

- 8.7. The council's discussions to date with the school, the local councillor, and Much Wenlock Town Council representatives show strong interest in investigating alternative operating models for the facility. The success of these options would require a range of significant changes, including additional capital investment, a commitment to repair and maintenance, and a change in access arrangements.
- 8.8. Therefore the Council intends to continue its dialogue with the William Brookes School, the 3-18 Academy Trust and other key stakeholders over the course of the proposed notice period, to explore all options to draw in capital investment in support of the shared ambition to retain the public use of the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre on expiry of the Council's revenue subsidy.
- 8.9. In the coming year, the Council is committed to continuing constructive discussions with the school about immediate improvements to the experience of leisure centre users, to be achieved through closer working together on an operational matters.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. The Council is obliged to review the operation of all its leisure facilities and seek best value approaches to their delivery. However, due to the unique design and ownership arrangements in place at the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre, it is not possible for the Council to improve the viability of the operation and reduce its costs.
- 9.2. Consultation has shown that residents very much value the Much Wenlock Leisure Centre and are keen to see it continue to provide a service to the community. It is therefore recommended to Cabinet that whilst there is a need to draw the current funding and management arrangements to a close, the year's notice period will be used to support the William Brookes School to explore all options to maintain the centre's community use.

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

Leisure Service Review Consultation report, Cabinet 4 December 2024

Local Member: Engagement with local councillors has been completed:
Cllr Dan Thomas

Appendices

Appendix 1 Much Wenlock Leisure Centre Consultation Report February 2025

Appendix 2 Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) 2025
