



# CAERPHILLY SPORT AND ACTIVE RECREATION STRATEGY & CONSULTATION: A Critical Analysis

## Abstract

*Caerphilly County Borough Council has embarked on a borough wide consultation of its Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019 – 2029. The implications for the Council and local communities will potentially be far reaching, particularly if the move toward the rationalization of our community sport and active recreation facilities results in the closure of a number of leisure centers within the county borough. This report provides a critical overview of this strategy and the associated consultation, and makes a number of key observations regarding potential weaknesses in both the strategy document and the consultation questionnaire, and concludes that Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres should be reprieved from any rationalisation programme based on evidence of need.*

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## 1. Introduction:

In March 2016 Welsh Government and Sport Wales published a joint report – Facilities for Future Generations: A blueprint for sport and active recreation in Wales. The report challenges public service providers in Wales, such as local authorities, to find ways to meet the wellbeing goals set out in the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, by seeking alternative, more economically sustainable models of service delivery. The contents of Facilities for Future blueprint forms the foundation for the Caerphilly County Borough Council Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019-2029.

There is no doubt that times are economically challenging for all local authorities across the UK and Wales in particular. Sustained year on year cuts to council budgets due to ongoing austerity measures imposed by the Westminster Government, are having a real effect on the ability of local authorities to meet their current service provision. Many Welsh councils have transferred their housing stock to housing associations and some have already handed over their libraries and leisure facilities to not-for-profit organisations, such as Aneurin Leisure in Blaenau Gwent.

Caerphilly County Borough Council has managed to retain its housing stock and invested millions in meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. The authority has also managed to retain its libraries and leisure centres, at least until now. Since July 2018 Caerphilly County Borough Council has engaged a county borough wide consultation on its Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019-2029, regarding the future provision of leisure services and in particular the potential closure of leisure centres in Ystrad Mynach, New Tredeger, Pontllanfraith and Cefn Fforest.

This report looks at the essence of that strategy and the potential impact of closing Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres, and how any

decision to close these leisure facilities may negatively impact on the wellbeing of the Mid-Valleys East community area.

## 2. The Case for Change:

Caerphilly County Borough Councils Sport and Active Recreation Strategy primarily focusses on the economic sustainability of the Council as a rationale for the rationalisation of sports and active recreation facilities across the county borough. On page 24 of the strategy in the section 'Major Financial Challenges' the Council state that:

*“Caerphilly County Borough Council has already made considerable savings in recent years - over £82,000,000 but further savings of over £34,000,000 are still needed in the next 3 years. For the most part, sport and active recreation provision is not a statutory requirement of local government and although Caerphilly County Borough Council is committed to maintaining front line services, it does recognise things need to change”.*

*“The Community & Leisure Services budget must achieve reductions over the course of this Strategy”.*

*“This strategy also makes the case for rationalisation enabling some savings to be used to enable investment alongside innovation and transformation”.*

Furthermore, on page 17, Caerphilly County Borough – The Place We Live In, Looking to the Future, the strategy states that:

*“Spread across the County Borough there are over 500 different sport and physical activity places, many are old and have become ‘tired’, are not cost-effective to run with inefficient heating, lighting and insulation services and no longer attractive to new participants or fit for future purposes”.*

There is no doubt that an economically sustainable Caerphilly County Borough Council is essential for the ongoing provision of core services. Simply, the economic wellbeing of the council is not necessarily mutually exclusive from the wellbeing of the county borough, as without a financially viable authority there would be a significant detrimental impact on the provision of essential social and welfare services to the population. However, it may be considered inappropriate for the council to use a one-dimensional interpretation of sustainability and sustainable development to provide services in one area of the county borough at the expense of another. As the strategy points out:

*“Different approaches are needed to respond to the highly varied and different local community needs with **priority given to addressing the greatest health and activity challenges in the most deprived Heads of the Valley communities**”.*

This statement seems to suggest that the bulk of investment in sport and active leisure provision will be targeted within the Rhymney Valley area, which has already enjoyed significant investment through EU funded Council projects. It should not be the case that sport and active recreation facilities should be rationalised in one community area of the county borough in order to fund provision in another, essentially a “robbing Peter to pay Paul” approach to service provision.

A decision to close Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres seems juxtaposed to the strategic focus alluded to in the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy, where it is explicitly mentioned that Blackwood is considered to be one of the five principal town centres within the county borough. The strategy states that:

*“**The 5 town centres and population hubs should be the future focus of strategic provision** - travel to destinations with good transport links. Furthermore, any future strategic sport and*

*active recreation provision should be shared use on education sites. They are an essential requirement for Curricular and Extra Curricular activity and a cost effective way of providing expensive facilities that also serve community needs”.*

*“The 5 principle town centres are: Caerphilly; **Blackwood**; Risca; Bargoed; and Ystrad Mynach”.*

The closure of Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres would mean that this principal strategic location would be without a major leisure facility. The council seems to be proposing that Newbridge leisure centre would provide the leisure centre for the Blackwood area. However, Newbridge leisure centre is situated approximately five miles from Cefn Fforest, the current location providing access to swimming facilities. Furthermore, Cefn Fforest leisure centre is situated in a ward that has a high on the index of multiple deprivation with significantly high levels of poor health and low levels of car ownership. As such, it may be argued that Cefn Fforest leisure centre is in an area of greatest need, and this will be discussed in greater detail below.

### 3. [A Collaborative Approach to Change:](#)

The Council’s argument for rationalisation based on the economic sustainability of the Council is compelling in as far as the authority needs to balance its books in order to provide essential services in the long-term. In order to achieve this the Strategy proposes and innovative approach to the sustainable provision of sport and active recreation facilities within the county borough. For example the strategy suggests that:

*“A more mixed economy of facility providers as a result of emerging not for profit operators, social and community interest companies alongside an ever-changing commercial sector”*  
(Page 21 of the strategy).

The statement above alludes to the possibility of supporting an alternative, innovative approach to solving issues of economic sustainability for Caerphilly County Borough Council via the third sector. It is suggested that sport and active recreation facilities may be provided by community interest companies (CIC's) or social enterprises.

This is an interesting proposition, because if the Council is unable to balance its books in providing these services now, how would it be profitable for third sector organisations to do so, given that third sector budgets tend to be under the same stresses as those of the Council. Also if the Council was seriously considering a third sector option for the delivery of sport and active recreation within the county borough then there should be an evaluation of the business case for transferring sport and active recreation assets to a suitable social firm within the strategy.

However, no evaluation of the potential for Council owned sport and active recreation facilities within the county borough to be asset transferred to a not-for-profit organisation is provided in the strategy, even though page 9 of the Facilities for Future Generations blueprint suggest that with regards to asset transfers:

*“If facilities are to be transferred by Local Authorities to a new community, or social enterprise, a prior review of facilities stock is necessary to establish: what is essential to support future needs; the potential for rationalisation and co-locations; the case for ‘invest to save’ models; the most cost-effective and economically viable solutions”.*

Including an evaluation of this type would be more informative. Giving the general public the necessary information on which to base their opinion regarding any agreement with potential collaboration in the provision of sport and active recreation facilities in the county borough.

An example of this is Aneurin Leisure, which is a not-for-profit charitable trust that runs education, leisure and cultural services across the Blaenau Gwent county borough. One possible reason for the omission of any evaluation of asset transfer may be that the Council sees the potentially lucrative sale of land once occupied by those leisure centres to be closed, as a way to claw back cash to reinvest outside of the Mid-Valleys East community area.

On page 31 of the sport and active recreation strategy in the section entitled: **WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE, Corporate Policy**, the Council states that:

- a. *In adopting this strategy Caerphilly County Borough Council recognises that sport and active recreation makes a significant contribution to achieve healthy lifestyles, education, economy and regeneration across the County Borough.*
- b. *Recognising that it is no longer feasible to provide the 'same service for all', the Council's unique role will focus on:*
  - i. *Working with others to make the best use of all available opportunities, facilities, funding and people;*
  - ii. *Making better and more innovative use of the widest possible range of indoor and outdoor physical activity spaces across all communities;*
  - iii. *Specialist interventions in approaches and places that will have the greatest long term health impact on priority target audiences and where no others are in a position to provide such assistance.*

The above statements are highly suggestive that the authority has already decided on what needs to be done and as such has already adopted the strategy as the way forward. This is interesting terminology



as at present the Council is engaged in a public consultation on the contents of the strategy. This makes the consultation a moot point. Why consult the public on an already adopted strategy? The consultation questionnaire is some seventeen pages long and includes some complex concepts and an implicit understanding of the terms within the strategy, the corporate plan and Welsh Government sport and active recreation policy. A discussion regarding the appropriateness and representativeness of the questionnaire, in terms of its validity and reliability as a measure of public opinion, is given below.

#### 4. When is a Consultation not a Consultation?

In July 2018 Caerphilly County Borough Council embarked on a public consultation of its Sport and Active Recreation Strategy. The consultation aims to assess public opinion regarding the strategy by using the data from the consultation. However, the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy Consultation: Help Shape the Future, questionnaire may not be considered a valid and reliable measure of public opinion? Evidence for this discussed in detail below.

The Questionnaire issued by Caerphilly County Borough Council to assess public opinions of the strategy has major limitations for its use as data. Although many questions are based on a “check box” format that is relatively standard for this type of consultation, many other questions are not. From the section ‘Our Vision’ onward, the questions contained in the consultation become increasingly complex and assume a certain level of knowledge of the Councils Sport and Active Recreation Strategy and operational function. For example Question 17 asks respondents:

*Q17 Do you agree or disagree that the following approach will enable us to best deliver this vision for the county borough? (Please select.)*

*Encouraging a collective responsibility*

*Agree Disagree Don't Know*

*Supporting others and only directly providing where the need is great and no others have the expertise or capacity to*

*Agree Disagree Don't Know*

The first statement requires a detailed understanding of what “*collective responsibility*” actually means. Although reference is made within the strategy to encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, the concept of this being “*collective responsibility*” is not necessarily explicit in context of individual, personal responsibility. A less opaque and much more explicit way of posing this question may be to use a valid and reliable metric, such as a Likert scale. For example:

How much do you agree or disagree with the statement that:

I should take personal responsibility for my health and wellbeing?

|                   |          |                            |       |                |
|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |

This type of question is superior to the style used in the sport and active leisure consultation questionnaire as it allows the respondent a scaled choice of responses. This can be used to quantify the responses and provide a meaningful measure of opinion.

The second statement has the same limitations as the first. It fails to define which “others” will be supported and what they may provide. The intention behind the question is actually masked by the terminology used and the structure of the sentence, semantics and syntax. The question is actually asking respondents if they agree that the Council should play a limited role in the provision of sport and active leisure provision in

favour of supporting others to do so instead. This is not clear from the statement provided. It may also be a leading question, specifically because it is masking an intention without clearly specifying what that intention may be.

Further along in the Facilities section of the consultation the same may be said of the statements in Question 31. Again the syntactic and semantic structure of the questions are overly complex for the lay person to digest and assumes that respondents will have read lengthy and detailed policy and strategy documents. For example:

*“Do you agree or disagree with the council, Adopting the Welsh Government and Sport Wales Facilities Blueprint for Sport and Active Recreation (Table 2 on page 32 of the strategy)”?* and

*“Adopting a decision matrix for determining the provision of strategic Leisure facilities that are directly managed by the Sport and Leisure Services (Table 3 on page 33 of the strategy)”?*

Assuming that respondents will read and understand the strategy or concepts referred to in these two statements is erroneous. It is highly unlikely that respondents will take the time read and understand these documents in order to answer the questions with any degree of confidence and as such the responses may be considered invalid.

The third question (Q33) is a closed question and uses a non-specified measure of emotion/opinion which is not a standardised or valid format. As such it may be argued that the form of the question is not well designed. For example question 33 asks respondents:

*“What do you feel would be the impact on you of rationalising facilities so that the Council’s Sport and Leisure service directly manages 4 strategic leisure centres located in Risca (serving the*

*south east of the borough), Caerphilly (serving the south west of the borough), Newbridge (serving north east of the borough) and one in the Bargoed/Aberbargoed area (serving the north west of the borough) with other leisure centres either transferring to school management (if they are joint use facilities located on a school site, subject to governing body approval) or closing completely.”*

*Positive      Negative      Neutral      No impact      Don't Know*

It is generally accepted wisdom for questionnaire and survey design that the wording should be non-technical and the questions should be relatively simple in structure both in terms of syntax and semantics, and they should avoid technical terms so as to circumvent the possibility of confusion. They should also avoid double-barrelled items, negatives, emotive language, leading questions, potential response bias and invasion of privacy.

A well designed survey uses valid and reliable metrics and constructs (Coolican 2014). Questionnaires and surveys should also be as brief as possible. The Caerphilly County Borough Council Sport and Active Recreation Consultation: Help Shape the Future, clearly violates many of these criteria for a valid and reliable survey.

For example, it is unclear if question 33 is trying to measure opinion or emotion. Asking respondents their opinion is a completely different psychological construct to asking them how they feel about something. The measure used by Caerphilly Council has no specific metric and as such is purely subjective. The words used to measure respondents 'feelings' regarding rationalisation are also potentially confusing as they range from vaguely emotionally relevant words such as: 'feeling' "Positive", "Negative" and "Neutral" to emotionally irrelevant words: "No Impact" and "Don't Know." This is meaningless.

Question 34 in the Facilities section of the consultation is open ended and requires a written response. Again the structure of the sentence is complex, which may potentially lead to confusion due to the use of technical terms and concepts, such as “asset transfer to schools”, “control by governing bodies” and the extensive use of information within brackets. Question 35 is a much simpler sentence in terms of structure but uses the word “*mitigate*”, which is again semantically complex.

The semantic and syntactic complexity of these questions are obvious, as is the assumption that people will invest the time to read the lengthy and complex strategic documents. Other questions with the consultation assume technical knowledge and statistical knowledge. Research has consistently shown that the lay person is generally inaccurate when making judgements of a statistical or technical nature (*Sarah C. Lichtenstein & Baruch Fischhoff 1977; Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*).

Furthermore, it is unclear from the design of the consultation if it is intended to be descriptive or analytical. If the intention is for the consultation to be used as analytical data then it may be argued that the design of the consultation does not meet this purpose as the questions are descriptive in form. There is no standard metric used within the questionnaire, in fact it is ‘ad hoc’ in structure.

Also there is no standardised instructions for answering the questions contained in the consultation. Rather it is assumed that respondents will have read, and more importantly understood, relevant strategy documents. This cannot be assumed as there is no standardisation in the administration of the consultation. Simply, respondents may answer the consultation on-line, using a printed copy or at a drop-in session and the strategy document is a separate item, found elsewhere. How much information and understanding a respondent will possess regarding the questions they are expected to answer will vary widely.

It may be convincingly argued that the Caerphilly County Borough Council Sport and Active Recreation Consultation: Help Shape the Future survey is poorly designed and administered. Firstly the consultation questionnaire has no internal reliability because it has not been shown to produce consistent answers over time or between questions. That is, the 'ad hoc' design of the metrics and complexity of the questions may significantly reduce the likelihood that any respondent will answer the questions the same way on different occasions, or not contradict themselves within the same statement. If the questionnaire has not been used before then it is also likely that it does not possess external reliability. Therefore the measures, and 'ipso facto' the answers, are inherently unreliable.

The second criteria that can be used to scrutinise the questionnaire is that of validity: are the questions used in the consultation actually measuring what they are supposed to. In this instances it is prudent to know if the questionnaire is producing a true reflection of public opinion regarding changes to Caerphilly County Borough Councils Sport and Active Leisure provision. It is doubtful that the questionnaire possess construct validity across all questions as many of the constructs used to answer the questions are vague at best, such as those used in question 33, and these constructs have not been subject to a full factor analysis.

Other aspects of validity can also be called into question such as that of the questionnaire's content validity. Many of the questions are weighted heavily towards the respondents possessing specific technical knowledge of Council and Welsh Government strategies. As suggested earlier, it may not be assumed that all respondents will have read or fully understood the concepts contained within these strategy documents, and this will undermine the ability of the questionnaire to produce an accurate measure of public opinion.

Besides this the consultation document is fourteen pages long and the suggested minimum prior reading some fifty six pages long. This may be considered inappropriate for a public consultation due to the time required to read the strategy document and then answer the questionnaire. It is unlikely that many respondents will invest the time necessary to fully digest the complex information contained within the strategy document and then accurately answer the questions within the consultation questionnaire, even if they did actually fully understand all of the questions. Also there is the question of how many potential respondents failed to complete the questionnaire or avoided making a response because of the time required to read the strategy and answer the questions.

What all of this means is that the questionnaire used by Caerphilly County Borough Council to assess public opinion regarding the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy violates many, if not all, of the criteria accepted as best practice in the design and delivery of a questionnaire. The consultation questionnaire is neither a valid nor reliable test of public opinion or 'feeling' on the subject, and as such it can be argued that no meaningful conclusion can be drawn from the information provided by the consultation.

## 5. Principals of Sustainability and Sustainable Development?

Both Welsh Government and local government make great use of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development. Caerphilly County Borough Council has a Future Generations Advisory Panel to advise the Council regarding the application of the Wellbeing Act. This panel evolved from the Sustainable Development Advisory Panel, which advised regarding sustainability and sustainable development. Both panels frame sustainability and sustainable development in the Brundtland definition. Brundtland (1987) is the most commonly quoted definition and it aims to be more comprehensive than most:

*“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs”.*

It contains within it two key concepts:

*“The concepts of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given, and:*

*The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environments ability to meet present and future needs”.*

This definition of sustainable development may be considered a strong definition of sustainability. Strong sustainability refers to the conservation of resources beyond economics. Conversely there is a weak definition of sustainable development proposed by Pearce and Atkinson (1993) which states that:

*“Sustainable development is concerned with the development of a society where the costs of development are not transferred to future generations, or at least an attempt is made to compensate for such costs”.*

Both Welsh Government, in its Facilities for Future Generations blueprint and Caerphilly County Borough Council, in the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy are using a weak sustainability definition of sustainable development in order to frame the strategy and the future provision of sport and active recreation facilities within the county borough.

A weak definition of sustainable development is in effect a neoliberal definition because it defines sustainability as a market driven process where economic activity governs the provision of services. This is made explicit in the UK government document – Sustainable Development:



The UK Strategy (Command Paper (HMSO 1994)) where it is suggested that:

*“Most societies want to achieve economic development to secure higher standards of living, now and for future generations. They also seek to protect and enhance their environment, now and for their children. Sustainable development tries to reconcile these two objectives”.*

Since Brundland’s (1987) definition there seems to have been a move away from strong sustainable development to weak sustainable development, a more monetarist interpretation. It is the more monetarist definition that both Welsh Government and Caerphilly County Borough Council have adopted in their approach to providing sustainable sport and active recreation facilities, now and in the future.

Whilst economic sustainability is important to current and future generations, it may possibly become divisive when it is applied to promote a neoliberal agenda. Simply, a neoliberal interpretation of sustainable development based on weak sustainability principals becomes an excuse for rationalising services based on a one-dimensional economic approach to sustainable development, which may actually be incongruent with the wellbeing objectives outlined in Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act. 2015.

Within the Wellbeing Act, Welsh Government defines sustainability as:

*“the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the well-being goals”.*

The problem with this is that it is attempting to use both weak and strong sustainable development principals concurrently, which may prove to be

conflicting in certain circumstances. This seems to be the case regarding the provision of non-essential council services such as sport and active recreation provision, where neoliberal weak sustainable development principals are being used to argue a case for the rationalisation of sport and active recreation facilities.

The argument seems to be framed by the concept of individual responsibility for personal health and wellbeing, with facilities being supplied by private or third sector organisations, based on demand. This is a typical example of the neoliberal agenda for the reduction of state provision over private or third sector provision. The Council suggests that, in pursuit of individual responsibility, people will be encouraged, through behaviour change interventions no doubt, to take personal responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

This is an interesting proposition, because the rationale for the closure of leisure centres is based on their lack of use. If you want to change behaviour in order to get people to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing then it stands to reason that you will need facilities for them to access in order to do so. Research has consistently shown that environmental barriers to behaviour change can have a detrimental effect on health outcomes (Becker et al 1977).

The problem with social behaviour change is that any perceived or real barriers to change will significantly reduce the effectiveness of any behaviour change intervention. Simply, if you change the environment through the removal of a leisure facility then people will tend to see this as a reason why they cannot improve their personal health and wellbeing.

The primary driver behind strong sustainability is the concept of “needs” and a drive to improve the quality of life for the world’s poor. The term “world’s poor” also means the poor and disadvantaged people of Wales and the Caerphilly county borough. Taking facilities away from people

through a rationalisation of state provision is unlikely to improve things for disadvantaged communities that have the greatest need for these state funded facilities.

The closure of leisure centres in Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith may potentially have a significant negative impact on the wellbeing outcomes for the Mid-Valleys East community area, and especially Cefn Fforest, as this ward is one of the most deprived in the county borough, and the most deprived ward in the Mid-Valleys East community area.

## 6. Evidence of Need in the Mid-Valleys East Community Area:

The Caerphilly Public Service Board's (PSB) area assessment of local wellbeing provides a wealth of information regarding the demographics and wellbeing needs of the Mid-Valleys East community area, of which the Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith wards are a part. The report states that:

*“The Mid Valley East community area includes the wards of: Argoed, Blackwood, **Cefn Fforest**, Crumlin, Newbridge, Penmaen and **Pontllanfraith**. The area is characterised by small rural villages to the north and larger residential areas to the south. The principal town in the area is Blackwood. The 2011 Census gave the population of the Mid Valleys East community area to be 45,266 which is an increase of 3,000 people since the 2001 Census. The individual wards that make up the area vary in size from 2,769 (Argoed ward) to 8,552 (Pontllanfraith ward).*

*The proportion of males aged 16-74 years who were long-term sick or disabled was higher in three of the eight wards in the community area than the county borough average of 8.6% - in the wards of Cefn Fforest (12.8%), Argoed (10.7%) and Pengam (9.2%). The proportion ranged from 5.9% in Blackwood ward to 12.8% in Cefn Fforest ward, with an average for the community*

area as a whole of 7.8%. Apart from Blackwood ward (5.9%) and Penmaen ward (6.5%), every other ward in the community area had proportions above the Wales average of 6.5%.

The proportion of females aged 16-74 years who were long-term sick or disabled was higher for Cefn Fforest ward (10.0%), Pengam ward (8.8%) and Argoed ward (8.6%) than the county borough average of 7.8%. All wards in the community area had higher proportions than the Wales average of 6.0%. The proportion ranged from 6.1% in Penmaen ward to 10.0% in Cefn Fforest ward, with an average for the community area as a whole of 7.2%.

13.8% of people in the community area as a whole stated that their day to day activities were limited a lot by their health, slightly lower than the county borough average (14.0%) but higher than the average for Wales as a whole (11.9%). This percentage ranged from 12.2% in Penmaen ward to 16.5% in Cefn Fforest ward, with every ward having percentages higher than Welsh average. In addition, Cefn Forest ward, Pengam ward (16.0%) and Newbridge ward (15.1%) had higher percentages than the county borough average.

The proportion of households with no car or van was lower than the county borough average (24.4%) in all wards in the community area apart from Cefn Fforest (31.2%). In addition to Cefn Fforest, the wards of Argoed, Newbridge, Pengam and Pontllanfraith had percentages higher than the Welsh average of 22.9%. There was significant variation in the percentages, from 14.4% in Penmaen ward to 31.2% in Cefn Fforest ward, with a percentage of 22.1% for the community area as a whole. Lack of access to a vehicle will make it more difficult for residents to travel to education, training volunteering and employment opportunities,

*particularly when there is a lack of appropriate public transport provision”.*

(The Caerphilly We Want: Caerphilly County Borough Area Assessment of Local Well-being. Caerphilly Public Services Board, March 2017)

These data show Cefn Fforest to be one of the most deprived wards in the Caerphilly county borough, with the Pontllafraith ward having the largest population of all wards in the Mid-Valleys East community area. As well as being the most popular shopping centre in the county borough, Blackwood is a natural centre within the community area and is identified within the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy (page 17) as one of the five principal towns within the county borough.

The community area has a growing population with a higher than average population of young people 0-14 years of age. In contrast the Mid-Valleys East community area has a high level of long-term limiting illness, particularly in the Cefn Fforest and Pengam wards. The ability of people to travel in order to access sport and active leisure facilities may be limited by the lack of car ownership in some of the wards within the community area, particularly Cefn Fforest.

At present Caerphilly Council’s sport and active recreation provision seems appropriate to the demographic. Cefn Fforest leisure centre sits directly adjacent to Blackwood and in one of the most deprived wards in the community area and county borough as a whole. Pontllafraith leisure centre sits directly adjacent to the main town of Blackwood and in the ward having the largest population within the community area and in a community area with a higher than average number of young people.

As such it may be argued that these leisure facilities are placed exactly where they are needed most by the majority people living in the Mid-Valleys East community area. To remove access to these facilities could

potentially reduce Caerphilly Council's ability to meet its obligations for a healthier county borough under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act. 2015.

## 7. Should Cefn Fforest & Pontllanfraith Leisure Centres Close?

Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres have complimentary facilities. Cefn Fforest leisure centre has a 25m four-lane swimming pool, which is ideal for healthy and enjoyable pursuit of swimming. A wide range of activities is available in the pool including aquafit, swimming lessons and adult and toddler classes. A 10m by 5m training pool with interactive games and water jets ideal for mums, dads and toddlers. A fitness suite with dedicated cardio and resistance areas. A Health suite with sauna and steam room and free car parking. The swimming facilities at Cefn Fforest are currently used by fifteen local schools. If Cefn Fforest leisure centre closed these would need to be bussed to Newbridge leisure centre, which is already used by schools in that catchment area.

Pontllanfraith leisure centre has a fitness suite with an extensive range of exercise equipment. Two squash courts with a spectator gallery. A multi-purpose 5 court sports hall which can cater for badminton, basketball, five-a-side football, netball, volleyball and a variety of other sporting activities. A dance studio. Third Generation, artificial turf pitch (ATP) and fully sanctioned by the Welsh Football Association up to Welsh League. One football and one rugby pitch. A range of vending machines for Hot and cold drinks, snack kiosk and free car parking.

The Council's sport and active recreation strategy considers that local schools will be one of the organisations that could play a significant role in providing sport and active recreation facilities at local level. If Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centre were closed, this would mean using the facilities at Blackwood Comprehensive School, Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhumni, Islwyn High School and Newbridge comprehensive. This

may be fine for evening use but access would potentially be limited during school hours.

Besides this, some schools have already pointed out capacity issues, suggesting that any increase in the number of external users accessing school sports facilities as a result of the closure of Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres would cause significant problems as they are already at capacity in terms of external users. As for Islwyn High School, access by the public is made difficult due to poor public transport links.

As such this represents a double negative impact on the authority's potential to improve health behaviours in the Mid-Valleys East community area, as two community leisure facilities are being closed in one already significantly deprived community area, leaving only Newbridge leisure centre which is located within Newbridge Comprehensive School and around five miles from Cefn Fforest, to compensate.

Travel to Newbridge leisure centre from Cefn Fforest for example, would require connections with at least two busses and a journey time of over an hour each way, for access by public transport. This may be considered to be somewhat of a barrier to those with poor health or limited mobility needing to access sport and active leisure facilities to improve their health and wellbeing. The negative impact of barriers to behaviour change has already been mentioned above. It is also worth mentioning that rationalising leisure centres to only four may increase the number of car journeys made by the residents of the county borough. This is again contrary to the principals of sustainability, which aims to reduce individual carbon footprint through a reduction in the number of individual car journeys.

Given the evidence it may be convincingly argued that the closure of Cefn Fforest and Pontllafraith leisure centres would negatively and unfairly impact on the future wellbeing of the Mid-Valleys East community area, the principal strategic town of Blackwood and especially the Cefn Fforest Ward, which ranks high on the index of multiple deprivation and as such has the greatest need for state provision.

## 8. Conclusion

Since the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development in Rio in 1991, governments the world over have been attempting to apply the principals of sustainable development encapsulated by Agenda 21 and its vision for sustainable environments, societies and economics. Welsh Government is the first national government to make the sustainability principals contained within Agenda 21, law. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is a bold attempt to ensure that public service providers in Wales work toward the creation of sustainable communities. However, as has been discussed, economic sustainability may work to hinder progress for social sustainability and wellbeing where adherence to economic and monetarist definitions of sustainable development serve to drive the political process.

There is no doubt that sustained cuts to council budgets due to the austerity measures imposed by the Westminster Government are having a significant detrimental effect on the ability of local authorities across Wales to provide services, especially those services that are additional to the statutory legal requirement. Caerphilly County Borough Council has clearly stated its case regarding the provision of sport and active recreation in the county borough “*Caerphilly County Borough Council does not have to provide most of our current sport and active recreation services*” (Sport and Active Recreation Strategy page 9). The reasons given for this position are entirely economic.



An argument for the rationalisation of sport and active recreation facilities based solely on the principals of economic sustainability is a position of weak sustainability, as it may not sustain those resources most needed by the community. As such the economic sustainability of the council is being promoted over the sustainable wellbeing of the people of the county borough. To use a weak sustainability definition of sustainable development based on politico-economics is to promote a neoliberal agenda for the rationalisation of state provision.

A neoliberal agenda is totally incongruent with current Labour Party policy. As Welsh Government and Caerphilly County Borough Council are both Labour controlled, it is inconceivable that their policies and strategies should be completely contrary to those of the parent party. In pandering to a neoliberal definition of sustainable development Caerphilly Council has provided themselves with a means to argue for the rationalisation of state provision outside of what is legally required, while promoting a strategy that effectively “robs Peter to pay Paul” by reallocating the savings from the closure of Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres to other areas of the county borough. This will mean that one of the most deprived wards in the county borough and one of the five strategic towns, will be without a leisure centre.

In order to solve the problem of sport and active recreation provision in the county borough, Caerphilly Council proposes a collaborative model of service provision and makes explicit reference to the potential for third sector involvement. However, the strategy fails to add detail to this proposal by providing an evaluation of the business case for transferring sport and active recreation assets to a suitable social firm.

Including an evaluation of the potential for community asset transfers of sport and active recreation facilities would have served to better inform the public regarding the options for future provision. Within the strategy the Council implicitly suggests that the sale of land once occupied by

Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres is a potentially lucrative source of free capital that may be used to reinvest outside of the Mid-Valleys East community area.

To give the impression of fairness Caerphilly County Borough Council has commenced a public consultation of its sport and active recreation strategy. The questionnaire is seventeen pages long and requires that respondents read the sport and active recreation strategy, which is fifty-six pages long. Within the strategy reference is made to other key documents which should be read if one is to understand the complexity of the questions contained within the questionnaire, such as the Welsh Government and Sport Wales, Facilities for Future Generations blueprint which is thirty-two pages long. This is an awful lot of reading for a lay person to undertake in order to answer an opinion-pole.

Besides this, the questionnaire itself may be considered unfit for purpose due to its structure and contents. It fails most, if not all, of the tests for a reliable and valid questionnaire. The syntax and semantics of many of the questions are overly complex and use technical language that require technical knowledge and a detailed understanding of the concepts that underlie them in order to answer these questions with any degree of representativeness. As such it may be considered that the consultation instrument, i.e. the questionnaire, is unfit for purpose and will not provide a true indication of public opinion on the consultation.

Evidence provided from the census and wellbeing assessment strongly suggests a need to maintain access to sport and active recreation facilities in the Mid-Valleys East community area. Caerphilly County Borough Council understand better than most that the needs of the communities in the county borough are great and that many communities have high levels of social and economic deprivation. However, if people are to take responsibility for improving their own health and wellbeing then reducing facilities or making access more difficult is unlikely to result

in a change in behaviour or for that matter an improvement in health related outcomes.

This report is not suggesting that Caerphilly County Borough Council is deliberately trying to work against the interests of the people of the county borough, nor is suggesting that solving the Council's current economic issues can be achieved by ignoring them. They are not likely to go away any time soon. However, economic conditions can and do change with time, and what is lost to the community now may never be replaced in the future. Thus, acting solely on an economic principal is essentially unsustainable.

There is of course evidence for the need to rationalise sport and active recreation provision in the county borough to save money and reduce duplication. Many buildings are outdated and in a poor state of repair. Cefn Fforest leisure centre has recently received a significant upgrade and as such is surely not in this category. As a strategic town centre Blackwood needs its own leisure centre and at present both Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres serve the town well. Newbridge is geographically too far away from the principal town to be perceived as sufficient, as is any provision on the Bargoed/Aberbargoed plateau. Given the evidence of need within the Mid-Valleys East community area, and that Blackwood is a principal strategic town centre, this report calls for a rethink regarding the placement of the four strategic leisure centres or a total reprieve for Cefn Fforest and Pontllanfraith leisure centres from any programme of rationalisation.

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