

REPORT ON LEISURE CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN IN BLAENAVON

Background

Although not a statutory requirement, the Head of Leisure and Community Services and the Special Projects Programme Manager undertook consultation with the community of Blaenavon to seek their views on the proposed provision of leisure services within the new Blaenavon Community Campus.

Methodology

A short questionnaire was devised outlining the current proposal, seeking views on the proposal and any other facilities that should be provided. In addition, a question was posed around preferred hours of use. A copy of the questionnaire is provided at [Appendix A](#).

The questionnaire was distributed to every household in Blaenavon during the week commencing 9th February 2009 (2,500 questionnaires were distributed). The closing date for consultation was 20th March 2009. Self addressed envelopes were provided with the questionnaires and for those residents who did not wish to pay postage, arrangements were made for completed questionnaires to be returned to the Customer Care Centre or the Library.

In addition, two open house events were held. The first was on Sunday 22nd February 2009 at the Communities First office between 1pm and 4pm. This event was held as part of the Communities First Community Audit of the Blaenavon 2 area. The audit sought residents' views of the area and one of the audit questions was specifically around the provision of leisure and the proposals for the Campus. The question used by the organisation undertaking the community audit, was the same question used for the consultation questionnaire. The event was advertised through a glossy leaflet produced by Communities First and delivered to every home in the Communities First area. The report of findings of the Community Audit are yet to be published.

The second open house event was held on Wednesday 18th March 2009 at the Workmen's Hall between 4pm and 8pm. This event was advertised widely throughout the town, was submitted to the Free Press and the Argus and was published to the Blaenavon Community Campus website. A full list of where the event was published is provided at [Appendix B](#).

The open house events displayed the proposed plans and through flipcharts, post-it notes, comment slips and consultation questionnaires, asked residents to record their views on the proposals and suggest alternatives. The Head of Leisure and Community Services and the Special Projects Programme Manager, together with other relevant council employees, were available to answer questions throughout both events.

Young people were consulted separately at both the youth clubs within the town through youth service staff.

Particular effort was made to advertise the events through BLAST and at the BLAST shop in Broad Street.

Finally, children were consulted through the medium of play at both primary schools during February and April.

Evidence of Need – Community Profile

In compiling this report, reference has been made to demographic data for the area. It is intended that the demographic data will help inform the decision around the range of facilities to be provided.

Blaenavon is a small community of nearly 6,000 residents with a perceived isolation. The age profile of the population is:

Age Range	Percentage	No. of people
0 to 15	19.3%	1112
16 to 44	35.6%	2052
45 to 59/64	23.4%	1348
65+	21.7%	1251

Information taken from the TCBC website which in turn was taken from the 2001 census

While there has been migration into the area, it is not considered that this migration will significantly alter the age profile of the town. The latest live birth data indicates that the birth rate in Blaenavon is increasing where it is reducing in the rest of the borough. However, it is anticipated that this increase will level off in the next few years and is likely to reduce thereafter in line with the rest of Torfaen, Wales and the UK.

Evidence from studies completed by Torfaen Local Health Board and the National Public Health Service for Wales indicates that Torfaen is a socio-economically deprived community that is predicted by 2013 to have a large increase in the numbers of older people, especially in the 80+ age group, and that therefore meaningful day activities will be one of the key areas to meeting some of the needs of older people. Studies that pre-dated the demolition of the pool and leisure centre indicated that only 20% of the Blaenavon population took any beneficial exercise. The same report highlighted that residents felt the old leisure centre was too expensive and that initiatives instigated were often disbanded due to lack of take-up.

There is therefore a need to provide a range of leisure facilities that will meet the needs of the diverse population today and tomorrow. There is a need to provide facilities that will appeal to all ages.

Consultation Results

All comments received during the consultation were recorded and are provided at the end of this report with a response where a response can be provided. In addition, post codes were requested from attendees, which were plotted to provide the spread of representation in the town. The resulting map is attached at [Appendix C](#) for information. Please note that the number of markers does not equate to the number of respondents because the same post code can be used for a number of houses within a street or area.

The return rates were as follows:

	General Public	Young People
Questionnaires distributed	2500	200
Questionnaires returned	233	70
Percentage return	9.3%	35%

The response from young people was particularly encouraging.

The preference for facilities expressed was as follows:

Facility	General Public*	Young People
4-court hall	107	34
2-court hall	106	28
Fitness Suite	177	46
Dance Studio	163	23
MUGA	150	44
Changing Rooms	158	31

** Some young people attended the open house events, which are included in these figures*

The preference for opening hours expressed was follows:

Opening Hours	General Public*	Young People
M-F 9am to 12 noon	68	8
M-F 12noon to 5pm	83	14
M-F 5pm to 9pm	138	18
Sat/Sun 10am to 4pm	156	23

** Some young people attended the open house events, which are included in these figures*

Therefore, the preference for facilities obtained from all avenues of consultation was expressed as follows. This list also contains the other suggestions made and the suggestions have been ranked by popularity:

Facility	No. of people expressing a preference
Fitness Suite	223
Pool	205
MUGA	194
Changing Facilities	189
Dance Studio	186
4-court hall	141
2-court hall	134
Sauna	9
Gymnastics	8
Squash	7
Cyber Café	7
Astro Turf	6
Outdoor Heated Pool	5
Kids area/crèche	5
Shop	5
Jacuzzi	4
McDonalds	4
Ski Slope	4
Community Rooms	3
Outside playground	2
Paddling Pool for tots	2
Water Play Area (sprinklers)	2

Petanque	2
Skateboard Park	2
Collapsible Pool for the summer only	1
Cycle Track	1
Roller Skating	1
Ice Skating	1
Cinema	1
Hydrotherapy	1
Drop in centre for adults	1
Equipment store	1
Climbing Wall	1
Youth Club	1
Playschemes	1
Judo	1
Karate	1
Grappling	1
Boxing	1
After school clubs	1

The preferred opening hours, including other suggestions made by consultees and ranked by popularity are as follows:

Opening Hours	No. of people expressing a preference
Mon-Fri 5pm to 9pm	173
Mon-Fri 12noon to 5pm	111
Mon-Fri 9am to 12 noon	74
Mon-Fri 4.30pm to 9.30pm	1
Mon-Fri 6am to 9am	1
Mon-Fri 7am to 8am	1
Weekends 10am to 4pm	179
Weekends 10am to 6pm	4
Weekends 10 am to 8pm	4
Weekends 9am to 6pm	1

Conclusion

The consultation results indicate that the community desire a fitness suite, swimming pool, multi use games area, changing facilities, dance studio and sports hall. There was a slight preference for a 4-court sports hall over a 2-court sport hall.

The preferred opening hours were 5pm to 9pm on Monday to Friday and 10am to 4pm on weekends.

Next Steps

Torfaen County Borough Council's policy position regarding the provision of a swimming pool in Blaenavon has not changed. The policy decision taken by elected members was that the revenue expenditure to subsidise pool use within this community could not be justified. While there is clearly a desire for a pool, a need cannot be established:

- Fitness can be addressed through other forms of exercise;
- Swimming is a good form of exercise for older people, however, other forms of exercise are equally or more beneficial such as weight bearing impact and resistance exercises to build bone density;
- The swimming requirement within the national curriculum can be met through alternative and existing provision;
- An independent report has found that a new pool would not be used sufficiently to make it financially viable;
- Alternative provision is accessible via a short bus or car ride.

It has therefore been determined that a new pool will not be provided.

The other facilities proposed and desired – fitness suite, dance studio, MUGA and sports hall are being designed in to the final solution and the desire for a 4-court hall is receiving serious consideration by the council, and will be provided if it can be done so within budget and within the site available without compromising the educational requirement.

At the time of writing this report, a community gym is due to be launched. If successful, this will negate the need for a further or additional fitness suite within the leisure elements. To ensure maximum flexibility for the community, a fitness suite size space will be provided within the design brief to be used either to complement the community gym or other leisure facilities.

The desired opening hours have been agreed, with flexibility to meet demand particularly in school holidays.

ANSWERS TO COMMENTS RECEIVED DURING CONSULTATION

Request for reasonable hire costs

The prices for use of the facilities will be the same as other TCBC facilities.

Request for community rooms

Community rooms are planned for the campus and will be situated in the Primary Care Resource Centre.

Request for funds for youth theatre

The campus funding is fully committed to development of the Campus. The North Torfaen Youth Theatre is funded currently by the Council and operates out of the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall.

“Half a million pounds was spent on Cwmbran boating lake! We only wanted £17,000 for pool and our leisure repairs”

The costs to repair the pool and leisure centre were considerably higher than £17,000. The bigger issue for the council was not the cost of repair, but the ongoing cost of running the pool, which was costing over £400,000 per year. To the council that represented £400,000 that could not be invested in education or other services that would serve a greater number of people and people with a much greater need. The monies for Cwmbran Boating Lake were derived from Section 106, Welsh Assembly Government, SLASH, COGG and the Environment Agency.

“When will the facilities be open to the public?”

Part of the consultation was seeking views on when the facilities were most likely to be used. The most popular time appears to be between 5pm to 9pm on Monday to Friday, and 10am to 4pm on the weekend. Although it is anticipated the school will make full use of the facilities, it is intended that some of the facilities will be available for use during school time. Whether the hall is available during school time will partly be dependent on whether a 4-court or 2-court hall option is chosen.

Request for tennis courts

Tennis courts already exist in Blaenavon very near to the campus development and therefore will not be re-provided as part of the campus.

Concerns about the security to school children

Security of the children is paramount and will be included in the final design, which will be shared with residents.

Request for collapsible stage and seating

This will be provided within the school, which will be a community focussed school, that is, for use by the whole community.

Request for the types of activity that can be provided in a 2-court hall

Softball 5-a-side	Badminton	Short tennis	Sports hall athletics
Table tennis	Martial arts	Dance	Aerobics
Circuit training	Tri-golf	Yoga	Pilates
Boccia – disability sports		Short indoor bowls mat	
Dodgeball	Street dancing	Soft play	Kid fit
Playschemes	Older persons activities		

Exercise referral activities

Mini 5-a-side Mini Basketball

“Why can't a pool be incorporated within the school – other schools have them?”

There are no primary schools in Torfaen that have a dedicated swimming pool.

“A three-quarter multi use games area is of no use”

A three-quarter MUGA can be used for various recreational sports or team games such as 5-a-side, hockey and basketball.

“The school should be built on the tarmac behind Hillside School where they are currently building a ridiculous ‘youth shelter or pavilion’. The pool should be restored to its rightful place. We do not need a ‘Community Campus’”

“A vast area surrounds Hillside School just waiting for school use new build and activities. Use it”

The school has grown in size since planning began. The advantage of a campus development is that most public services will be available in one place, which will make for more efficient use of resources and means that local residents do not need to make multiple trips. The only site big enough to accommodate the campus development is the recreation site.

“The male and female changing facilities should not be put together”

Male and female changing facilities will be separate.

“Put this money into the health service instead”

Health service funding is separate to funding for local authorities.

“Is there going to be a bus service? As most of the elderly community will not be able to reach so called campus, especially if the GP surgery is going to be sited there?”

A bus service did not previously service the leisure centre and swimming pool. However, as part of the campus development, the council is discussing a subsidy of the 13/14 service to re-route a short distance and call in to the campus development, where a new bus stop will be provided. In addition, it is hoped that greater use can be made of community transport.

“I don't see a problem with the schools staying as they are – my children go to Bryn Onnen so won't be affected. It's the sports facilities that bother me, living in Blaenavon with 3 children and nothing to do. I have to travel up to 3 times a week into Pontypool to use the pool and facilities and it's a nightmare”

It is the council's full intention to provide leisure facilities within the town, however, it is not the council's intention to provide a swimming pool.

Comments about the cost of transportation

Bus fares are set by the bus operators who struggle to run a financially viable service. The council currently subsidises public transport in and around the Blaenavon area to ensure that the service continues to be provided.

“The Cleaning of Blaenavon beautiful War Memorial Clock. Had this clock been sited at Cwmbbran or Pontypool, the work ensuring this would be done regularly. In case it's forgotten, we do have Heritage World Status”

The budget to maintain public clocks has only been sufficient to ensure they remain operational by providing an electricity supply. However, a bid is being made to the Blaenavon Regeneration Partnership to obtain funding to clean the war memorial clock and a quotation is being obtained from a monumental mason.

“What happened to the insurance money for the weather damaged leisure centre?”

The leisure centre was fully covered by the Council’s Building Insurance Policy and was subject to a £100,000 excess. The estimated cost of the storm damage was around £107,000, which was recoverable from insurance but the Council was subject to the excess and would have had to contribute £100,000 from the Insurance Reserve. The insurance monies only covered those items damaged as a direct result of the storm but there were other faults with both the leisure centre and the pool that required a significant capital investment. An insurance claim was made for the revenue costs for loss of income, the cost of scaffolding, costs associated with make the buildings safe and storage of the fitness equipment.

Comments to which there is no response

“There’s more than one gang in Blaenavon”

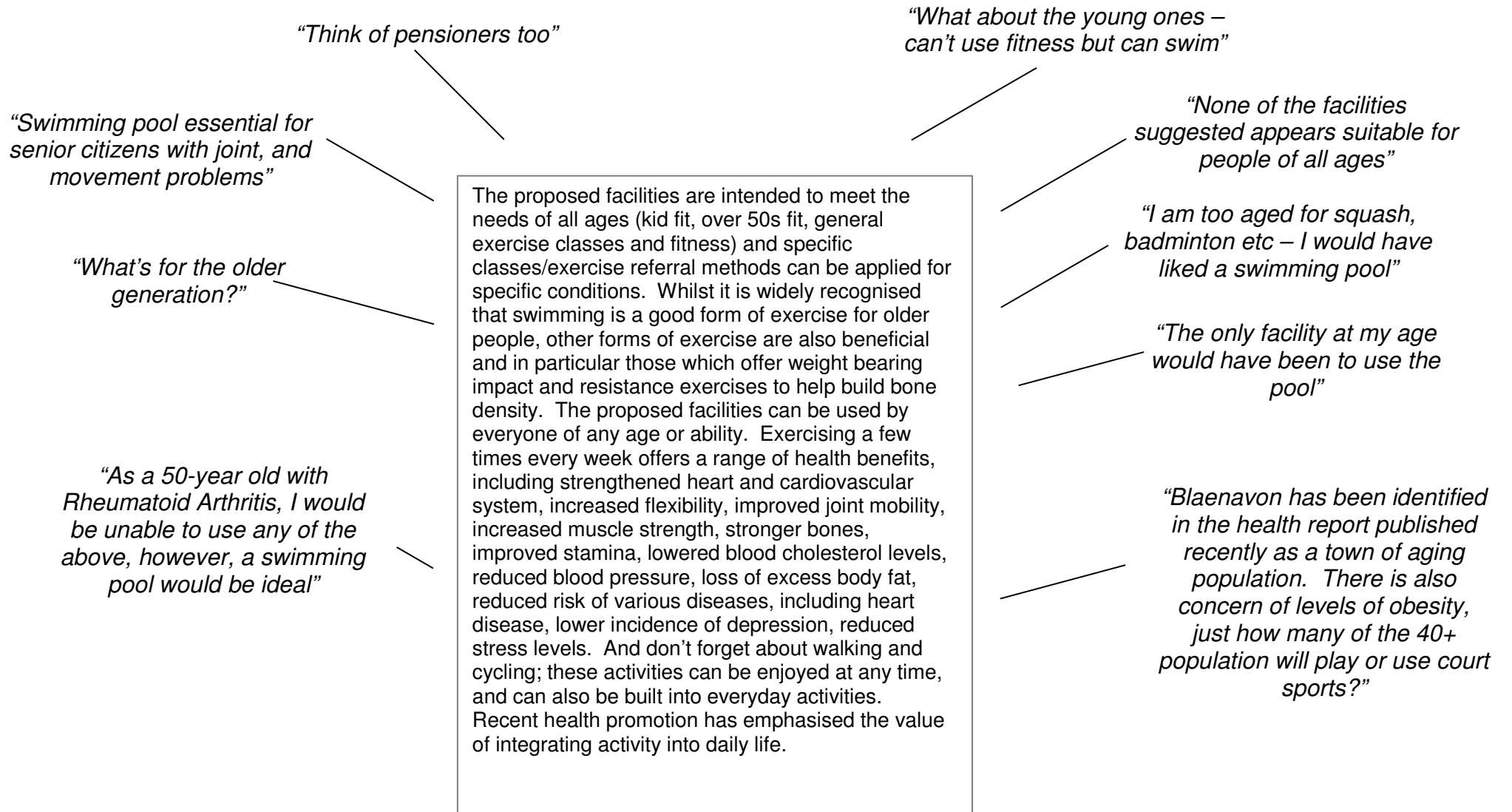
“Walking is all the exercise I need”

“Let’s insult all the people of Blaenavon. We had a leisure centre and swimming pool. You demolished them. Never would use it. Rebuild our Swimming Pool. Rebuild our Leisure Centre”

“Torfaen Council has got to be the worst council on the planet”

“Will this ever happen, if we lived in Cwmbran we would have had a new school years ago and we would still have a leisure centre and swimming pool”

Comments about the relevance of the proposed facilities for all ages



Comments about the council not listening

“Take example from Pembrokeshire Council – they care”

“Why waste tax payers money sending this out when you will do what you want anyway?”

“Will these papers just be filed onto one side like everything else?”

“This is just a paper exercise and it is very doubtful that my comments will be taken into consideration”

“Listen to the voice of the people”

The purpose of consultation is to listen to the views of residents. There are always going to be occasions when the council cannot deliver what is requested for a variety of reasons, sometimes because it is not the right body to deliver the item or service, sometimes because it has a finite budget and competing priorities that have to be met, which means it simply cannot afford to provide what is being requested. This does not mean that the council hasn't listened. Like parents or homeowners, it has to make decisions about how it spends its money and sometimes those decisions are unpopular.

“Did you take any notice of Blaenavon residents before. Thank you for taking time to waste money on this letter”

“By the look of the information you provided you have already made up your mind, what you are going to have, come what may. You do not take any notice of what people want, or say”

“Do our comments really count? Do the council even listen to what the people of Blaenavon really want or is this just a paper exercise?”

Comments regarding swimming

"A swimming pool should be provided so that Blaenavon children do not have to travel to Pontypool to fulfil the requirements of the National Curriculum"

"While desperately needing a new school, losing our leisure facilities to provide it was unacceptable"

"We really do need our swimming pool back. The pool was put there by our ancestors contributions, who could ill afford to pay this money"

"Swimming pool is greatly needed"

"Swimming Pool otherwise in Blaenavon we will have generations of children who won't be able to swim, as parents cannot afford transport out of town. Also myself and husband would like use of pool as we done in the past 3 times a week"

It was always anticipated that there would be a strong core of residents requesting a swimming pool. The issue for the council is the cost of running any such pool in a relatively small community. Even a brand new pool on the day of its opening would need significant subsidy from the council to keep it operating and in the council's view, the money needed to fund the subsidy can and should be better spent on education and other services for vulnerable people. These assertions are supported by an independent consultant with many years experience in the leisure, and in particular, swimming industry who consulted with BLAST when deriving the business case.

"Let the Workingmen's Institute run the pool voluntarily; they have already done a business plan and it could be updated. Run at no expense to TCBC"

"There are numerous people for whom the only pain free form of exercise is swimming"

The council recognises that swimming is a popular activity, particularly among a specific group of residents but there are other forms of exercise available to residents and there are five other pools within a short bus or car ride from the town.

"Blaenavon needs a swimming pool as well as Pontypool. When it was in use, more people used it than Pontypool"

The leisure facilities and swimming pool were not removed to provide the new school. They were removed because they were too costly to repair and in the case of the pool, too costly to run. The evidence, taken from the till, is that the pool in Blaenavon was under-used and enjoyed less frequent visits than the other pools in the borough.

"I have 5 grandchildren; the three oldest swim the two youngest have never learnt since our pool was taken away"

"Can't a swimming pool be built on the school grounds that are being demolished?"

Swimming is part of the national curriculum and children will be taught to swim through their schools. The cost of transportation is met by the school.

The pool in Pontypool Active Living Centre is very popular, however, when demand for the pool is high the system of limiting the time people swim to an hour is used. This has been in use for sometime now, and very few complaints have been received.

"A swimming pool is desperately required in Blaenavon. It should be a basic necessity for a community the size of Blaenavon. We pay more than enough council tax"

"You go down to Pontypool to swim and you get told it's full so you can't swim"

Comments about paying for postage to encourage replies

“Maybe Torfaen BC should have pre-paid the postage on these surveys for return. Is Torfaen afraid of the resulting feelings of the area?”

“You might receive more response if postage costs were borne by Torfaen Borough Council. Could this be that TBC are afraid of the truth?”

The council has been criticised for wasting public money when it has provided pre-paid envelopes in the past. It was therefore determined that an addressed envelope would be provided for those residents who wished to return their forms by post. In addition, arrangements were made for the forms to be left at a number of public venues within the town. The public venues were listed on the consultation questionnaire. Furthermore, two public open house events were held at which residents could ask questions, provide comments and return or complete a consultation questionnaire in person.

“If you want a good response a reply-paid envelope would be good. But perhaps you don’t want people to reply?”

“As an incentive to encourage the return of questionnaires, Monmouthshire County Council provide FREEPOST envelopes”