



Gateshead Council – Proposed Changes to Leisure Services

Summary Report

Prepared for: Colleen Briton

Prepared by: Judith Welford & Cathy Brown

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A young girl with a large, curly afro wig is shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the right. The image is tinted with a blue color. The text "Getting inside your consumer's head" is written in a white, cursive font over the right side of her face and wig.

*Getting inside your
consumer's head*

Contents

1.0	Background & Research Objectives	3
2.0	Drop-In Locations & Key Stakeholders for Focus Group Sessions	3
3.0	Attendance	4
4.0	Executive Summary	6
5.0	Attitudes to Drop In Sessions and Consultation Process	7
6.0	Focus Group Sessions Feedback	22
7.0	Appendix	40

Proposed Changes to Gateshead Leisure Services

Stakeholder Feedback

1.0 Background & Research Objectives

Launchpad Research has been commissioned as an independent partner by Gateshead Council to facilitate drop-in sessions within all Leisure Centres across the Gateshead Borough as well as hold focus group sessions with key stakeholder groups to understand more about how the proposed changes to the provision of Gateshead Leisure Services will affect all user groups of the facilities.

These sessions have been held as part of the public consultation process running from Wednesday 2nd November – Tuesday 13th December 2022.

This report will represent stakeholder concerns and detail the overall impact of the proposed Leisure Facility closures on Gateshead communities, including ALL feedback gathered at each of the Drop-in and Focus Group Sessions.

It is understood this report will then feed into the Cabinet Report Appendix prepared by Gateshead Council, due for submission in January 2023.

2.0 Drop-In Locations & Key Stakeholders for Focus Group Sessions

As part of the Consultation process, Drop-In sessions were held across each of the following locations:

Facility	Date	Times
Heworth Leisure Centre	Thursday 10 th November 2022	12:00 – 14:00
Blaydon Leisure Centre		19:15 – 21:15
Birtley Leisure Centre	Friday 11 th November 2022	10:30 – 12:30
Gateshead Leisure Centre		17:00 – 19:00
Gateshead Stadium	Thursday 17 th November	12:00 – 14:00
Birtley Swimming Centre	Saturday 19 th November	10:30 – 12:30
Dunston Leisure Centre		12:30 – 14:30

Members of Gateshead Council present at all sessions: Andrea Tickner, Service Director, Corporate Commissioning and Procurement and Michael Lamb, Service Director, Leisure Services

Members of Launchpad Research present at all sessions: Judith Welford, Associate Director and Cathy Brown, Associate Director

Focus Group Sessions were held with 4 Key Stakeholder Groups and all moderated by Cathy Brown, Associate Director, Launchpad Research:

Stakeholder Group	Date	Time	Location
Swim Clubs	Wednesday 23 rd November	18:30 – 20:00	Gateshead Stadium
Additional Needs	Friday 25 th November	10:00 – 11:30	Gateshead Civic Centre
Schools		12:00 – 13:30	
Jewish Community	Tuesday 29 th November	10:30 – 12:00	Bewick Centre, Gateshead

3.0 Drop-In Attendance

Drop in session attendance figures varied significantly across all 7 locations. Leisure Centres identified in the Cabinet Paper, dated 25 October 2022, as most likely to close resulted in substantial footfall compared to those facilities that were not mentioned in the report as at risk¹ Approximate attendance figures outlined below:

Heworth Leisure Centre, c. 9

Blaydon Leisure Centre, c. 25

Birtley Leisure Centre, c. 15

Gateshead Leisure Centre, c. 200

Gateshead Stadium, c. 7

Birtley Swimming Centre, c. 14

Dunston Leisure Centre, c. 400

¹An exception to this is Birtley Sports Hall – Birtley gym within the Leisure Centre building is currently ran by a private operator, whilst the sports hall situated externally from the Leisure Centre is understood to be the sole responsibility of Gateshead Council. Attendance at the Heworth drop in session was the lowest of all centres. However, it is worth noting that those who did attend feared the public had been encouraged to

stay home after receiving newsletter communication that Heworth had been saved and was not at risk of closure leading many to think there was no reason to turnout as part of the consultation.

The Focus Group Sessions targeted specific Key Stakeholder groups identified by Gateshead Council, with the following organisations / groups contacted to take part:

Invitees - Swim Clubs	Invitees - Schools	Invitees - Additional Needs	Jewish Community
Birtley ASC Blaydon ASC Gateshead & Whickham ASC Gateshead Synchronised Swim Club Tyneside 114 BSAC	Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership Brighton Avenue PS Carr Hill Community PS Front Street PS Gateshead College Dunston Hill PS Gibside Specialist School Harlow Green PS Ravensworth Terrace PS Riverside PS Brighton Avenue PS	Age UK Gateshead Special Olympics Inspired Support Kestrels Club Phoenix Centre / ABC Gateshead Adult Social Care Play Development Team NHS Cardio Rehabilitation Team NHS CNTW Trust Hilltop Specialist School Parent Carer Forum Cedars Trust Ways to Wellness	Labruit Healthy Living Centre

The following groups attended the focus group sessions:

Swim Clubs:

Two representatives from Whickham/Dunston Swim Club, Chair and Treasurer from Gateshead Synchronised Swim Club, Club Secretary of Birtley ASC and Treasurer of Tyneside 114 BSAC

Schools:

Two representatives from Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership, Head Teacher Carr Hill Primary School, one representative from Gateshead College, Business Manager of Dunston Hill Primary School, and Head Teacher of Ravensworth Terrace Primary School

Additional Needs:

Two representatives from Ways to Wellness, one representative from Cedars Trust/Kestrels Club and one representative from Gateshead Adult Social Care

Jewish Community:

Six representatives in attendance

All views and feedback obtained from each of the representatives from the key stakeholder groups outlined above and views from those who attended the drop-in sessions are included in this report.

4.0 Executive Summary

The findings across both drop in sessions and focus group discussions have revealed common themes :

- There is a general feeling of mismanagement and lack of foresight from Gateshead Council's point of view, with little or no business or commercial planning to save the leisure centres within the Borough – *too little too late*
- Many residents have expressed their disappointment at the short notice and timeframe of the consultation period, and feel they have been let down by the process, skeptical that their opinions at this late stage will matter – *just a tick box exercise, they never listen to the residents*
- Regular leisure centre users, including organisations and clubs are skeptical about the footfall numbers outlined in the Cabinet report and would like to see this revisited and recounted – *completely misrepresentative*
- The impact of proposed closures has generated a lot of anger and disappointment, with the Gateshead people united in their concerns pertaining to the effect on:
 - Emotional and physical wellbeing for all
 - Loss of the 'heart of their community' & a lifeline for many
 - Loss of an essential public service
 - Impact on other public services (short & long term) as a result of the closures
 - Social behaviour concerns, specifically the impact on antisocial behaviour moving forward
 - Overall impact on children and young people, developmentally and limiting their progression in sport and general life skills
 - How the remaining leisure centres will meet the demand to accommodate all schools, organisations, communities, and public sessions

- Accessing alternative leisure centres, resulting in increased transportation costs, logistical issues, and safety concerns
- Impact on lower income areas, the poor will become poorer with further loss of public services
- Swim clubs will have no alternatives which will result in closure and in turn impact provision of essential life skills and competitive advantage for young people
- Gateshead and Dunston Leisure Centres have unique facilities in terms of pool size (both), depth (Dunston) and provision of amenities to service people with additional needs and nonpublic viewed sessions
- Overall, the closure of the centres will have a detrimental effect on aspiring athletes and future generations within the Gateshead Borough which is viewed as a huge loss for the community and will result in lack of sporting representation from Gateshead in general, moving forward

5.0 Attitudes to Drop In Sessions and Consultation Process

Despite being advertised as drop ins only, many members of the public attended the scheduled sessions expecting a town hall style meeting where a member(s) of the Council would present the rationale for the change to leisure service and the consultation. At the drop in sessions a short PowerPoint presentation was available for members of the public to read, as were posters providing key information about the proposed changes to the provision of Leisure Services in Gateshead. There was disappointment that little additional information to that available via the Council's website was offered, and this led to claims that the drop ins were simply a tick box exercise, with the final decision on closures having already been made. For some this confirmed a personal narrative expressed, that the Council have been running down the service over a number of years and are simply gathering evidence to support the decision to close leisure facilities.

While the principle aim of the drop in sessions was to understand the impact potential leisure centre closures would have on members of the public across the Borough and where or how they might seek alternative services, it was clear that the announcement of the consultation and threat to services came as a surprise to many. This resulted in many of the drop in attendees' comments focusing initially

on the retrospective management of leisure services across the Borough, particularly in the immediate post-Covid-19 period.

Not only were many taken by surprise at learning a number of centres are at risk, but individuals were also disappointed about the speed of the consultation, feeling the Council were requesting ideas (via the consultation survey) when there is insufficient time for any to be considered, evaluated, and tried. This reinforced beliefs amongst some that the consultation is meaningless as the decisions have already been made. The perceived speed of the consultation led some to demand greater transparency over what the Council has already tried in an attempt to increase revenue (including whether energy saving measures such as solar panels on centre buildings or land have been considered). This was seemingly an attempt to make sense of why leisure services need to close urgently. While many had read the financial assessments presented on the Council website, few had read the full cabinet report which was criticised by some as inaccessible and not written for a general public audience.

There was notable questioning of many of the figures provided in the Council's documentation produced and circulated to support the consultation process. Members of the public pointed to a number of potential inaccuracies and expressed a desire to see more transparency with regard to how costs (maintenance, repairs etc.) and figures were put together. In particular the attendance figures per centre were criticised as inaccurate on a number of counts, specifically that:

- Some centres were closed for periods of time during which the data was drawn and as such are not representative of actual usage
- In some, turnstiles are left open for members to go through, so counts are inaccurate
- For private pool bookings turnstiles are left open for groups to go through
- Figures are based on post-Covid opening hours when demand is much higher than availability and so they do not represent actual demand

There were also felt to be gaps in the information provided in council produced documentation, with members of the public wanting to see more on the turnover of each centre per year, an accurate timeline for potential closures, and better understanding of what specific cited costs would be spent on (namely £9.1m required for Gateshead Leisure Centre).

Members of the public are concerned that the financial viability assessment only goes so far and overall evaluation should include a much broader impact assessment than that presented, one that looks at risks to public health and wellbeing, mental health, social, economic, and indeed environmental impact (of individuals travelling further to access services).

Retrospective criticism of council management

Criticism of Council Priorities

Many drop-in attendees keenly understand the context in which the Council is having to make difficult decisions on services. Despite expressing obvious anger on the potential centre closures, people largely acknowledged that the cost of living crisis generally, and energy price increases more specifically, are inevitably making it more expensive to run leisure centres and putting pressure on Council resource. However, an over-riding wider theme to emerge from the drop ins was disapproval of how Gateshead Council makes decisions and prioritises. The council were criticised for not asking residents what their priorities are before decisions are made (generally and more specifically in relation to leisure services), with some expressing that decisions are frequently made 'behind closed doors' without consultation with the Gateshead population.

Members of the public spoke broadly about perceived Council waste, mismanagement, and inefficiency. Numerous individual examples of perceived waste were given (cycle paths, multiple copies of paper council tax bills to correct errors, closure of the Gateshead Flyover etc.), while many referenced the high council tax paid in Gateshead and questioned why, if core services were at risk, cuts were not made in other areas (for example senior council staff salaries).

The recent Levelling Up Fund bid was frequently mentioned across all drop ins as an example of how the Council is viewed as not prioritising for residents. The general public argued that further development of the Quayside area is of little or no value to the Gateshead community and certainly not a priority area when the council is having to consider cutting what are deemed to be 'essential' services (like leisure), that are of more direct benefit to the Gateshead population. Many argued that the people of Gateshead would be better served by leisure facilities than further investment in the Quayside. In contrast people found it difficult to understand why

Newcastle City Council is prioritising a new leisure centre build when Gateshead is reducing the same services.

Poor management/mismanagement of the service

Anger around the potential loss of facilities led many to speak at length about the retrospective and recent management of leisure services. There is significant anger and frustration at the perceived poor management or mismanagement of leisure facilities across the Borough. This frustration centred on two broad areas; inflexibility to meet the existing demand which has pushed members towards other facilities/options, and a general mismanagement of leisure services displayed by a lack of commercial thinking on how to run the centres profitably.

Despite reading the documentation and figures produced by the Council, across the drop ins people expressed disbelief at how the council-run leisure services can require a subsidy or not be profitable. Many individuals referenced the inability to book sessions due to the high levels of demand, long waiting lists for children's swimming lessons, desire to see more sessions (ladies only classes) and longer opening hours, and the need to book sessions as early as 5-6am to secure spaces (Aquafit). There was significant frustration that despite clear demand, the Council has not expanded services to meet this demand, providing opportunity to increase revenue.

Post-Covid Reopening

Members of the public repeatedly mentioned the impact of the prolonged closure of council-run leisure services which were viewed as opening much later than most others following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Many argued that this delay pushed members to look for other options available elsewhere, as council-operated facilities, though preferred, were simply not available. The service was criticised for making no real attempt post-Covid to market or advertise reopening in an attempt to gain back those lost members, or encourage those adjusting to post-Covid living.

In addition, there was also frustration that even in recent months, the pre-Covid level of service has not been provided at facilities, with some elements (for example cafes) still not open. People made a direct connection between more limited opportunities to use the facilities and declining revenues. At every drop in session across the Borough people mentioned that facilities have shorter opening hours, fewer bookable sessions (meaning what is available is over-subscribed) and more

limited public swim sessions than pre-Covid.² These factors were all cited as pushing leisure centre members towards other non-council facilities and 'running down' the service. Individuals also claimed that some centres are not open at peak times of demand (centres closing at 3pm on a Saturday etc.) and opening hours do not reflect what many members of the public require to enable them to schedule use into their day.

Lack of commercial management

The factors mentioned above, alongside others, fed into a widely expressed belief that council-owned leisure services have been managed with a 'public service attitude' rather than a commercial approach over recent years. Those attending the drop ins frequently mentioned that centre managers appear inexperienced, that restricted opening hours and session availability indicate a lack of commercial attitude and that space in centres is frequently under-utilised with rooms standing empty, lack of promotion/marketing and a refusal to consider bookings that would bring in extra revenue (for example private hire bookings, children's parties, extra studio sessions). Some specific facilities, such as the soft play and Clip 'n' Climb at Gateshead Leisure Centre, were frequently cited as amazing assets that are not run commercially (limited opening hours, still requiring advance booking) therefore ultimately being viewed as a waste of money as their potential has not been capitalised on.

Staffing issues

While some drop in attendees did acknowledge that more limited opening hours and sessions were the result of staffing shortages, the Council was also blamed for its inability to hire and retain staff due to the offering of short-term, temporary contracts, poor salaries compared to neighbouring areas, and poor treatment of staff. There was strong feeling that the Council requires a better approach to staff training and retention.

²Specially mentioned were general centre opening hours, Aquafit, public swims, privately booked separate gender sessions arranged by the Jewish community, specific cafes, soft play at Gateshead Leisure Centre, and Clip 'n' Climb at Gateshead Leisure Centre.

Marketing and Advertising

As already briefly mentioned, drop in attendees were critical of the lack of marketing and advertising undertaken in an effort to promote Gateshead's leisure facilities, especially post-Covid, or tempt back lost members following post-Covid reopening.

The few examples of marketing material members of the public did reference were deemed to be out of date, while the majority were unable to recall seeing any marketing. Many felt this represented a lack of proactivity and expressed dismay at how membership, use and revenue could be grown without a strong focus on marketing the facilities available.

No increase in membership fees over time

Linking to concern over a lack of commercial management, many attendees could not understand why, if the service has been failing to reach zero subsidy over a number of years, membership fees for existing members have not been increased to support the profitable running of the service. Some stated that they have seen no change in their membership fees for the last 10-12 years. Increasing membership fees for those who can afford was frequently mentioned as an idea to make the service more sustainable.

Use of Centres

Naturally, the majority of drop in session attendees were frequent users of council-run leisure services. Many mentioned using their main leisure facilities weekly or even on multiple days in the week (up to 6 times a week for some). Most use the leisure centre geographically closest to them, with those in Gateshead in particular accessing Gateshead Leisure Centre primarily on foot. A smaller proportion of attendees mentioned using multiple leisure centres across the Borough, often to access different facilities, to access children's swimming lessons as their nearest centre is already at capacity, or to attend session times that are more convenient than those offered at their nearest leisure centre post-Covid.

Impact

Community hub

While many acknowledged the challenge the council face in maintaining the service as costs rise, attendees expressed a strong emotional response to the risk of centres closing due to the history of their use and the role the centres are deemed to play in their communities. Some described having used at-risk centres for as many as 50 years, having personally learnt to swim there, brought their own children to lessons, and now their grandchildren. In this context, individuals argued that the decision to close should not be purely made based on financial circumstances but a broader assessment of community, social and health impacts.

Across the board, regardless of location, members of the public described their local leisure centre as 'the heart of the community'. Individuals spoke of the leisure centres as places where the community comes together, those exercising (perhaps for the first time) make friends facing similar challenges and experiences. They were explicitly described as 'lifelines' by people who were accessing for personal health reasons (ranging from post-operative recovery and cancer, to age-related illness) and others who are accessing centres for social reasons, to fight off loneliness or address mental health issues, or as families to spend time together.

At Heworth, Gateshead, Birtley and Dunston in particular, people spoke about the high levels of deprivation locally and their fears that if their local centre closes, there will be little left for people in their part of the Borough. These concerns arose from a general sense that public services have been continually cut over a long period of time and more specifically that leisure centres are one of the only remaining facilities genuinely there for the benefit of the public. Losing this type of community hub was feared as having a detrimental effect on young and old alike, an action that would lead to the further running down of communities that are already struggling. People anticipate that such closures could make areas like central Gateshead, Dunston and Heworth, less attractive as places to live and work, and lead to increased anti-social behaviour and crime as young people are deprived of leisure facilities that keeps them off the streets. Specific concerns were raised about what would happen to buildings and land if the at risk leisure centres close, citing existing derelict buildings as focal points for anti-social behaviour.

Physical and Mental Health

While some members of the public recognise that leisure services are not a statutory requirement, that the Council must fund, many felt strongly that to call these spaces 'leisure centres' is a misnomer. Many drop-in attendees clearly expressed that they

see leisure centres as a vital part of the health ecosystem, describing them as health and wellness centres that primarily facilitate healthy living and fitness and only 'leisure' facilities for a few. Attendees spoke broadly of the value of leisure centres in helping tackle health issues such as obesity (which was repeatedly reported as high in Gateshead), through to their role in post-operative recovery, pain management of age-related illnesses such as osteoporosis and arthritis, social prescribing, and the vital role they play in supporting good mental health amongst many other specific examples. Many members of the public told deeply personal stories of their own use of the leisure centres for positive health benefit reasons (both mental and physical), or how use has helped friends and family members. Within this context, leisure services were described as an essential part of the health system, neither a nice to have nor a luxury. Attendees pointed to the contradictory nature of both local and central government messaging that has encouraged the public to take responsibility for their own health by participating in exercise, while leisure services are now at risk of closure.

As such, drop in session attendees voiced strong concerns about the medium to long term impact of leisure centre closures on the physical and mental wellbeing of Gateshead residents. Individuals are worried that closures will lead to a deterioration in already poor health levels which will ultimately require additional funding in other areas to address the resulting impact. Many people currently use leisure facilities to self-manage health conditions and they fear that a cut in leisure services will ultimately put extra pressure on the NHS and other ancillary services.

Social Behaviours

Alongside the health impacts cited by many, drop in session attendees also often raised concerns that a cut in leisure services will impact children, younger and older people socially (impact on children and younger people is detailed on page 15 of this report). While many older people were reported as accessing leisure facilities for health reasons, many also referred to a parallel social benefit which staves off loneliness, gives some a reason to get up and leave their homes each morning, and keeps them connected to their community. Tied to the concerns raised around community deprivation, individuals wondered what would be available for older people to make and maintain social connections when many are limited in terms of mobility and nearby leisure facilities close.

Cost and logistics of travel to other leisure centres

Alongside the broader anxieties related to physical health, mental health and social behaviours, more specific concerns about the cost and logistics of transportation to alternative leisure facilities were raised frequently in drop in sessions. Particularly in the case of Dunston and Gateshead, many residents walk to those centres due to their central location. Should they close, accessing alternatives will mean increased travel costs. Many reported that this increased cost to cover transportation would be unaffordable, meaning they could no longer afford to use leisure centres. Others commented that they would rather pay an increased membership fee in order to keep all leisure centres open than pay additional costs to travel to another centre, adding on travel time and logistical issues.

Individuals also mentioned the logistical challenges of accessing centres further than their current. Families in particular raised that the challenge of transporting multiple children on public transport would deter them from using leisure centres should their nearest close, while others who currently send their older children on foot would not be confident sending them via public transport (due to distance and safety risk). Others talked about how use of leisure facilities currently fits into their daily schedule – before work, during a lunch break or after work. These users reported that the additional travel time required to attend an alternative leisure centre would not be feasible as part of their daily routine. In these cases, individuals stated they would stop exercising or using leisure facilities.

The Jewish community, in particular, raised concerns about the logistics of children’s swimming lessons if there was a requirement to travel further than central Gateshead to access facilities. As children’s swimming lessons for the community currently take place after school hours, members of the community felt it was unrealistic to schedule these sessions outside of the immediate Gateshead centre as travel time would eat disproportionately into evenings, restricting access.

Vital service for children and young people

Many of the physical and mental health benefits of leisure centre access cited in relation to adults were also raised in relation to children. Leisure centres, and in particular swimming lessons, were stated as a vital service for children. Many drop-in session attendees referenced swimming as part of the national curriculum and raised concerns over how remaining centres would accommodate all of the local schools and their scheduling needs. In turn, some stated concerns about how schools, many of whom currently take their children on foot to local leisure centres

for lessons, would manage to cover the cost of transportation should their local centre close. As previously mentioned, many parents referenced long existing waiting lists for swimming lessons in the Borough (with some already paying for lessons in other Local Authority areas) and felt that a reduced number of leisure centres would simply impact capacity and availability further.

Aside from being part of the national curriculum, parents talked about the many benefits their children experience from accessing swimming be that through school lessons, pre-school lessons or clubs. Many talked about the confidence swimming has given their children, the discipline, the introduction to staying fit and healthy, and how it provides great opportunities for social interaction in an environment where background and ethnicity do not matter. Many expressed concerns about the potential loss of all these benefits if swimming opportunities for children become more limited as a result of closures.

Broadening from a focus on swimming, Gateshead Leisure Centre was spoken about widely as an essential facility for families and in terms of facilitating organised sessions which offer children from deprived backgrounds the opportunity to participate in positive activities – not only swimming but football too. These sessions, alongside the gym, are viewed as keeping children and young people off the streets and potentially nurturing talent that would otherwise go unspotted. Drop in session attendees stated concerns that the closure of Gateshead and Dunston in particular would lead to a loss of emerging talent in relation to football, swimming, and synchronized swimming. It was felt one impact of closures would be to squash the potential of younger people growing up in the area. This was viewed with much sadness within the context of Gateshead’s wider reputation as a champion of sport. In both locations, though to a greater extent in central Gateshead, people were fearful that closure of facilities would lead to much higher levels of anti-social behaviour, with options for children and young people severely limited. This was described by many as the likely domino effect of closures, with money saved on running leisure centres required in the short and long term to deal with the unintended but inevitable negative consequences. Individuals wondered where groups running with young people from deprived backgrounds can be accommodated if Gateshead in particular closes and whether support will be available to help groups relocate.

Private gyms

More generally, many questioned the availability of private gyms across the Borough as stated in the Council's consultation documents, and some also questioned the suitability of these facilities for some users. Members of the public argued that there are not many private gyms available at easy distance in central Gateshead and Heworth, and while some may be available, none have the pool facilities of council-run centres. Others commented that they use council-run facilities as they feel much more comfortable in them compared to more 'intimidating' and less affordable private gyms. In these instances, individuals would not consider private gyms as an alternative.

Concerns around private partner running remaining services

While not a direct focus of the consultation, members of the public had many questions and concerns about the impact of a private partner running any remaining leisure centre facilities on behalf of the council. Specifically, some attendees were concerned that a partner may not be found, given the financial challenges outlined in the council's consultation documentation. However major concerns were raised about what services and program any private partner may decide to prioritize and whether this type of contract would ultimately lead to further centre closures or reduction in programs. People expressed worries that a private partner would not run facilities with the same commitment to local communities as the council must and may not accommodate sessions such as children's swimming lessons which are part of the curriculum. More generally drop in session attendees fear that remaining leisure centres will simply not be able to accommodate the extra demand from the potential closure of Dunston and Gateshead, as two well-used centres, and cannot visualise currently how the remaining centres will be run to ensure they deliver what is currently accessed by the public and levels of demand.

Many will cease to exercise

Ultimately, many said if their local centre closes, they won't travel elsewhere to access leisure facilities, they will stop exercising. Attendees were disappointed that the leisure centre consultation survey did not provide this as an option, rather assuming that members will go elsewhere. To this point, a number of people questioned what would happen to existing memberships if an individuals' main centre closes, for example would individuals receive refunds?

Solutions

Many of the ideas and solutions put forward as a result of the drop in sessions reflected criticism made of service management over recent years. Of primary importance, drop in attendees felt there was a strong need to approach the service with a more commercial attitude moving forward.

Fees (increase/more flexible options)

Members of the public attending drop ins across all leisure centres mentioned that they would be willing to pay more for their membership if it meant services could be protected. This also extended to hire fees for group bookings. This suggestion was seen as basic business sense in order to make the service more sustainable. However, individuals were also keen to suggest the entire membership pricing structure should be revisited, with more flexible package options available that may encourage sign ups from those put off by the rigidity of the existing structure.

Temporary changes

Others urged the council to look at temporary changes that could save money in the short term while energy costs are particularly high, or protect parts but not the whole, of at risk centres. These suggestions ranged from charging for hairdryer use and encouraging people to shower at home after their swim, to keeping the Gateshead Leisure Centre pool open but closing down the remainder of the building to reduce the energy costs of heating such a large unit.

A more commercial approach

Reflecting the strong sentiment that leisure services have been mismanaged and not delivered with a commercial attitude, members of the public suggested the centres need proper commercial management that can focus on increasing revenue using the many assets available. Suggestions included focusing on better use of the currently under-utilised spaces, such as hiring out rooms to organisations for meetings, conferences, training, as workspace etc., optimizing swim and studio schedules to ensure sessions run at times convenient to users, ensuring there are sufficient sessions running to meet demand and ensuring studios are not left standing empty. People would like to see more openness to private bookings in everything from halls, studios, rooms, and pools, to Clip 'n' Climb and soft play (the ability to book private children's parties was frequently mentioned as a way more revenue could be raised). Others suggested that the council could offer out the opportunity for private companies to run the café facilities in leisure centres,

delivering food and drinks that would encourage people to stay longer, build centres further as community hubs, and bring in additional revenue from a rental income. As part of thinking more commercially about the running and financing of the centres, some also suggested that the council could look to secure sponsorship, either for parts or the whole of facilities.

Private partner operating leisure services

While the public naturally have questions and concerns around a private partner running the remaining leisure facilities, after discussing potential models some did feel this could be a positive option moving forward as it should provide the required expertise to improve service and run the facilities more commercially. However, for some it did raise the question of whether all six leisure centres could be part of the tender process rather than those remaining after the consultation decision is made. Many are aware that once centres close there will be no opportunity to reopen. In these instances, individuals felt it would be more prudent to explore this as an option prior to any decision on closures.

Closure of Gateshead Stadium

There was some anger expressed by members of the public that Gateshead Stadium was not being considered within the same consultation process as the other six leisure centres. Rumours circulated via social media channels had led some to believe that if Gateshead Stadium closed the other leisure centres could be saved. While members of the public were informed by council officers that the Stadium is being considered in a separate process and would also need to be zero subsidy moving forward, there was some opinion expressed that the Stadium is not a facility that is there for the benefit of the local population, more for people and groups outside of the Borough. Individuals argued that professional sports at the Stadium isn't sufficient to justify its continued survival when services used more frequently by residents are at risk.

At risk site feedback

Drop in attendees questioned how the Council could accurately compare the six leisure centres across the Borough as each of them are deemed to offer very different facilities to very different communities across the Borough (from saunas, steam rooms, pool depths/lengths, number of pools, gyms, and differing leisure facilities such as soft play and Clip 'n' Climb).

Gateshead Leisure Centre

High levels of turnout at the Gateshead Leisure Centre drop in were reflective of the broad use of the centre by all of the community across the town centre and more widely from across the Borough. Given its central location, the size and diversity of the immediate population it serves, and footfall levels reported (although questioned), many could not understand why the centre it is at risk of closure. It was strongly argued that despite the financial situation laid out in the Council's documentation, Gateshead is the most well-used centre so the rationale to close is severely undermined.

Like other leisure centres, Gateshead was described as pivotal to the community, and it was clear from feedback at the drop ins and the focus group with the Jewish community that the centre has a unique offering for the local community which is not currently available at other centres. Members of the public and attendees at the Jewish community focus group stated that Gateshead is currently the only suitable option for those requiring single-sex swim sessions. While access to single-sex sessions is pivotal to the Jewish community for cultural reasons, people also mentioned that these sessions at Gateshead are also accessed by Muslim women and other members of the public who prefer to swim in a single-sex group. Speaking to the Jewish community in depth, it is clear that all other council-run pools have windows to the public and are therefore not suitable for these requirements. While a temporary solution was found for the community when Gateshead Leisure Centre closed for refurbishment in the past, this option was costly (requiring private funding to facilitate travel) and not deemed to be a suitable long term alternative.

As previously mentioned, many travel to Gateshead Leisure Centre on foot and have limited other options to travel elsewhere easily. Individuals reported that the cost, time and/or challenge of travelling by public transport (particularly for families) means that if the centre closes, they will not be able to access alternative facilities elsewhere in the Borough. Individuals argued that the broad range of facilities available at Gateshead are not replicated elsewhere nearby, with facilities such as PureGym unable to offer swimming, saunas, and steam rooms, only gym facilities and classes.

Dunston Leisure Centre

The Dunston Leisure Centre drop in session generated similar thematic feedback from members of the public to that gathered at other drop in sessions, however there was also a specific focus on the risk of losing a centre with a unique offering catering specifically for swim clubs. Attendees not only pointed to how well-used the centre is but concerns about where clubs will go if the facility closes. As a competition level pool and the only deep pool in the Borough, Dunston is argued to have a distinctive offering that is not available within the Gateshead leisure portfolio or indeed elsewhere in the North East. Alongside more general concerns about the impact closure would have on the community (a trigger to further deprivation), members of the public fear that closure of the facility will lead to a major reduction in developmental and progression opportunities for young people in the area. Individuals spoke passionately about the ways in which their children have benefited from swimming lessons and membership of clubs such as synchronized swimming at Dunston. Of the major benefits reported were confidence building, discipline, health, social, opportunities to travel, and in some cases education and career development. Club members and their parents struggle to see how the groups can continue without the facilities Dunston offers and there was also specific concern about a number of young people completing Diploma in Sporting Excellence Program's and where they would be able to undertake the practical element of the program following closure of the centre. Mirroring feedback from across the Borough, those in Dunston are concerned that closure of the leisure centre will also close down prospects for talent to thrive in an area that already experiences challenges in providing opportunity to young people. Individual attendees expressed disappointment that the Council does not embrace the unique offering of Dunston and champion it further to promote it and sporting excellence in Gateshead more generally.

Blaydon Leisure Centre was explicitly rejected as an alternative facility should Dunston be closed. Not only was it deemed to have insufficient pool depth and size for a variety of clubs but also cannot accommodate spectators at the level offered by Dunston for events such as swimming galas etc. Users of Dunston pool also highlighted that Blaydon is already a very popular pool facility with classes already full and limited parking available due to the shared use of the space between swimming, football groups and the NHS health facility.

6.0 Focus Group Sessions Feedback

The Focus Group Sessions have revealed some common themes in relation to concerns and impact of the potential closure of Leisure Centre facilities on the Gateshead (and wider) communities. *Worth noting that the same concerns mirror feedback obtained from the Drop-in Sessions.* These concerns include the impact of:

Physical wellbeing

High levels of obesity within the Gateshead borough are a concern, understood to be amongst the highest in the region. Stakeholders are confused by the mixed messaging communicated widely by the council and by the Government to residents about tackling obesity levels by encouraging exercising and healthy eating, yet the decision to close Leisure facilities confuses many and is conflicting with the National message.

Swimming is also a low impact activity and allows all ages and people with disabilities to engage in exercise, with other higher impact activities out of scope. Many are concerned about the removal of two or more swimming facilities in the Borough as capacity will be stretched to accommodate everyone, which will result in no exercise options available to more vulnerable groups.

Mental health

Growing concerns on social pressures and the need to address mental health issues is prevalent across all groups. Exercise is viewed as being a 'one size fits all approach', with a positive impact on mental wellbeing for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, or ability.

The provision of leisure facilities is viewed as being a necessity and essential to support both physical and mental wellbeing and should not be considered as an 'optional' service.

Development of social skills

There are concerns that without access to Leisure facilities, children and young adults will suffer significantly, especially in deprived areas around the Gateshead Borough. The provision of Leisure Centres gives these children a community and a

safe haven to meet and in turn, teaches them life skills and social skills some would not be fortunate to learn elsewhere.

Social behaviour – short and long terms effects

Stakeholders are extremely concerned on the impact of social behaviours worsening within their communities if Leisure Centres should close, with many voicing strong regard to what alternatives will be offered to stimulate this target – Gateshead residents are anxious about the short and long term effects on their streets, potentially further fueling anti-social behaviours, and resulting in safety being a major concern.

Pressure on other health and social services departments – short term & long term

The research has revealed that residents are confused by the decision to close up to three leisure facilities in the Borough; they are aware of current strains and pressures on other public services and health services and are concerned about the longer term impact on these departments, as referrals and cases relating to mental health, obesity and anti-social behaviour are sure to increase - *It doesn't make sense*

Transportation costs

At the time of writing, Gateshead and Dunston Leisure Centres have been cited as two of the most likely facilities to close. Many residents walk to these centres due to their central location within the communities. Alternative options, should they close will mean increased travel costs which is a concern especially due to the current cost of living crisis for individuals and organisations alike. Most have said that they will not be able to afford to travel to an alternative centre and will cease to exercise which will have a detrimental effect on their physical and mental wellbeing.

Post Covid

All have said that Gateshead Council were late to open their Leisure Facilities post-Covid in comparison to other local authorities within the North East. Since reopening, respondents have also said that the facilities are not being utilised fully; cafés have remained closed, Clip 'n' Climb within Gateshead Leisure Centre has never reopened, operating times of specific facilities is limited (this includes soft play in Gateshead and public swim times across all facilities), studios are empty, yet

the demand for exercise classes is high. The examples provided lead to a general feeling that the Leisure Centres have not been optimised appropriately to generate business and increase turnover which has subsequently led to the decision to close.

No-one can recall post-Covid marketing activities to entice members back to Gateshead facilities – it is understood that many opted for alternative gyms post-Covid but were never contacted to inform them the centres were reopening or to incentivise them to return, which respondents feel could be another contributing factor to the reduced footfall.

Members of Dunston Leisure Centre have said that they have often requested private pool parties and additional leisure sessions, but their requests have been declined – the research has revealed that many residents across the Borough feel there has been no business foresight to protect leisure facilities which has led to major frustration.

Membership

It is apparent that membership costs have not increased for some time, with many members on subsidised membership fees. Almost everyone we spoke to have said they would be willing to pay more per month to ensure the centres remain open. Many are shocked that this has not happened, again, in order to have foresight into better managing the operating costs.

Staff

Many have spoken with Leisure Centre staff members who have said that they were not taken off furlough after Covid, so blaming staff shortages as part of the reason as to why centres are not being utilised fully leads to further frustration.

Insufficient timelines & inaccurate data

Many feel the decision to close the Leisure Centres has happened too quickly, has been an internal decision, without any sufficient public consultation. Many of the figures and statistics within the Cabinet report are deemed to be inaccurate which is a major concern.

Swim Clubs

In addition to the common themes outlined above, there are specific concerns for Swim Clubs if pools are to close.

From the swim clubs who attended the focus group sessions, they have a culminative total of approximately 550 members and run training sessions between the clubs daily. If their usual pool is to close, it is apparent that all Swim Clubs will have to fold which will have a detrimental effect on the community, aspiring competitive athletes and amateurs alike.

Gateshead Synchronized Swim Club

An example of this is the Gateshead Syncro Club, who have five girls due to enter Great Britain trials in December 2022 / January 2023. To reach this standard they require at least four training sessions to prepare for the trials to build up strength and stamina to compete. However, due to existing public pressure on pool use, Dunston will not allocate the requested two lanes on a Saturday for an extra training session as this would reduce public pool space. The biggest frustration in relation to this, is that the pool closes at 3pm on weekends – if longer opening hours were an option, this would allow for additional public pool time and in turn, allocate time for the additional training session request. There is again, a general feeling that the facility is not being used to its full potential to increase use and revenue.

Members of the Synchronized Swim Club have also been accepted onto the Dyce progression program. There are only ten places available nationally, and three members from Gateshead Synchronized club have qualified which is a huge achievement. Without a pool to train in, these members will not be able to continue on the program.

Furthermore, alternative pools within the Borough are not suitable for synchronized swimming due to their shallow depth. Pool depth should be at least 3 meters in depth and 25 metres long to conduct safe synchronized maneuvers (Dunston pool depth is 3.9m).

Issues around using alternative pools will also put pressure onto volunteer time as travel time will increase and different days/times for the lessons is likely; there is a concern that volunteers will dwindle as a result, as they cannot commit.

To date, the club has contacted various centres around the North East, namely, Gosforth, Sunderland, Tynemouth, and Northumbria University, but have received responses to say that they cannot accommodate them.

Dunston & Whickham ASC

Dunston and Whickham Swim Club has approximately 200 members, of which 80% are Gateshead residents. In addition to providing swim lessons for children, like the Gateshead Synchronized Swim Club, they also have members who compete nationally at Junior and Master levels. The club has also nurtured competitive swimmers who have competed at European championships and who hold European and British records.

As Dunston cannot accommodate all of their training sessions due to capacity, they do use other pools (Blaydon on Monday evenings and Elswick two mornings per week). They have already spoken with these pools to understand if they can accommodate the Dunston sessions should the facility close (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday) but have already been told this is not possible, so they have no alternative.

All clubs also use the fitness rooms within Dunston to help members improve their strength for swimming competitively as well as to help with general mental and physical health.

Dunston pool is often used for galas for Dunston and Whickham ASC and Gateshead Synchronized Club – the galas are essential as they generate profit for the clubs to survive. Dunston pool is viewed as perfect for galas, with no or limited alternatives available should it close. In addition to the views of the local clubs, other swim clubs located outside the North East, who attend the galas have also expressed how perfect the Dunston pool is for these events:

The NE and Yorkshire Region travel to Dunston Pool to use the facilities for competitions and hopefully grade days. The pool is perfect as it has the right dimensions including the right depth for competitions, it has a spectator gallery and rooms where our officials can hold their meetings. The majority of competitors travel from the Yorkshire area, Tracy Wyke, Swim England North East Artistic Swimming

Birtley ASC

Birtley ASC has 120 active swimmers, plus an additional 42 children on a waiting list to attend lessons with approximately 78% of members residents within the Gateshead borough. The club has been running for almost 50 years and has been fundamental in the community for teaching children and adults to swim. It is a family orientated club, and plays an important role in family swimming, with parents,

grandparents and children of all abilities utilising the pool. The club pays to put swimmers through their level 1 and level 2 training certificates as well as lifeguard training which has often led to employment for young people, and often a lifeline for many.

Tyneside 114 BSAC

Tyneside 114 BSAC also uses Dunston pool for dive sessions as it has 3.9m depth and is the only option in the area for this club, with members ranging from 12 years to 75 years old, with the majority of its members residing within Gateshead.

Impact

Overall, the closure of pools will have a detrimental effect on aspiring athletes and future generations within the Gateshead Borough which is viewed as a huge loss for the community and will result in lack of sporting representation from Gateshead in general moving forward.

In addition, and as outlined earlier in the report, the effect on mental and physical health will also be greatly impacted. Members have referred to several scenarios where their swim clubs have literally been a lifeline and a safe place for a number of youngsters who have been suffering from bullying, anxiety, depression, and self-harm. The clubs not only provide support in teaching swimming, but offer counselling which has helped many through personal traumas. There is a major concern about members' wellbeing, specifically children; if the pools are to close, what do they do as an alternative and how do they fill that time? There is genuine concern about social behaviours moving forward and how society will be impacted in 5-10 years' time. Swimming is viewed as providing children with a life skill and instills discipline, organisational and teamwork skills which many are not fortunate to learn elsewhere.

Solutions

Dunston and Whickham ASC and Gateshead Synchronized Swim Club have been working together and have had conversations with the council to understand if Community Asset Transfer is possible. However, in order to do this, Dunston pool would need to remain open for at least twelve months for any business plan to be viable as closing prior would result in extensive costs to reopen the pool which would be beyond their reach.

Members have suggested mothballing other areas of the facility such as the gym and studios to reduce costs and keep the pool running in the short term until the Transfer is in place.

If the Asset Transfer is not an option, the clubs require significant support from the council and local MPs to help them gain access to alternative pools.

It is also understood that the land Dunston Leisure Centre was built on was donated many years ago by a local Gateshead resident to the community; many members feel the land and facility should be donated back to Gateshead residents as a gesture of good will.

Additional solutions offered by members include consideration of installation of solar panels and heat pumps to reduce energy costs. They have also volunteered their own lifeguards for the training and swim sessions which could reduce council costs.

Schools

The focus group session heard views from various primary schools, Gateshead College, and The Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership; all expressed significant concerns over the potential closure of Gateshead and Dunston Leisure Centres.

Post-Covid, the participants have disclosed that they saw an even greater demand to provide sports activities for children to help with obesity levels (Gateshead understood to be one of the highest levels in the UK) and mental wellbeing.

Primary Schools

Head Teachers and representatives of the primary schools present at the session, specifically Carr Hill Community, Brighton Avenue and Dunston Hill have expressed the importance of the leisure facilities for their pupils. Their schools are within low income catchment areas, with many of their children having limited opportunities to be able to access sports. The support provided by The Gateshead Sports Partnership for these schools and others, specifically their Sport-ability program is viewed as priceless by primary schools due to the positive impact it has on pupil wellbeing, giving children the opportunity to take part in multiple sports activities which they would not normally be able to access.

Carr Community Hill Primary School has a diverse range of pupils, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and welcomes refugee families into its fold. Many pupils are unable to speak English, and some have many personal traumas to contend with, as well as some pupils demonstrating behavioural challenges. To help address the emotional needs of children, the school sends four classes every week, from years 3-6 to swim sessions at Gateshead Leisure Centre Swimming pool which gives the children a common denominator – an escape from harsh reality and everyday challenges - to swim; and as a result, build confidence and sense of achievement. It also teaches children a basic life skill, the importance of safety in the water as well as many going on to learn lifesaving skills too – all of which can be transferred into adult life.

The Head Teacher, Mr. Paul Harris has expressed his anguish at the thought of the children not being able to take part in swimming sessions – it is a lifeline for so many and without it, poses many personal challenges for the families as well as additional pressures on the school to provide additional emotional support for all children as well as those that require special educational needs. Worth also noting that Mr. Harris has a lot of children enrolled who have additional needs to take the pressure off other special needs schools in the area. Swimming is particularly important for these children as it helps to develop fine motor skills and gross motor skills – from a cognitive aspect, swimming also teaches children how they can do things in a safe and fun way.

Brighton Avenue Primary School also uses Gateshead Leisure Centre on a regular basis for swimming lessons as well as using the sports halls for other sporting activities as part of the Gateshead Sports Partnership program. Children are able to walk to swim lessons which is a huge benefit and avoids transportation costs.

Dunston Leisure Center is located close to Dunston Hill Primary allowing children walk to their swim lessons.

All schools have expressed their concerns over budget constraints, and general lack of budget to accommodate additional transportation costs should they have to travel to alternative sports facilities. It is also understood that the Council cannot provide financial support for transport and schools are unable to claim transportation as part of any sports grants they receive. Ultimately schools would have to pass the costs onto parents (which is not feasible for most).

Further concerns are raised by all those in the group session about the ability to continue to offer all children as part of the mandatory key stage curriculum, the opportunity to swim. Some children who have met the statutory requirements will have to miss out on swimming, to focus on fewer numbers who need additional swim time to meet the statutory requirements.

Capacity is also a major concern, with two out of five pools closing in the area, and with approximately 80 schools who need to offer statutory swimming lessons to their pupils it is deemed impossible to cope with the demand across the three remaining pools. Shared sessions with other schools is not an option and should not be a consideration moving forward.

Primary schools have also stated that due to capacity issues across the three remaining pools, additional travel time and impact on other lessons, they may have to consider holding swim lessons before or after school which will cause additional logistical issues as well as additional expenses to cover staffing etc., which they simply cannot afford.

In addition to pools, the gyms are also used by older school children and young adults. Head Teachers were able to give examples of children known to them who are at risk of exclusion due to behavioural issues but use the gyms to burn off energy and anger through exercise. The council facilities are also affordable, and accessible on foot – there is a general concern for these children if the facilities close and what means they will turn to, to vent their anger which is a major concern.

Overall, the health and emotional wellbeing of children not being able to access sporting activities is a significant concern for their development moving forward and will undoubtedly have a social impact in years to come.

The Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership

The Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership have said that their footfall numbers in the Cabinet report were incorrect, with figures more in the region of 6000 using Gateshead Leisure Centres. They have also provided recent attendance figures for sporting activities during 2022 and anticipated attendance figures for 2023, with around 40% of primary school events and 20% of secondary school events currently taking place at Gateshead Leisure Centre (see Appendix).

The Partnership offers a program across the Gateshead Borough for competitive and participatory sports in order to provide opportunities for children that may not otherwise have it. They offer approximately 70 events across an academic year for primary schools and around 40 per year for secondary schools. The types of events are held at Gateshead Leisure Centre, purely as no other facility in the region can accommodate them or have the appropriate space. They have specific programs that cater for children with learning disabilities and give them the opportunity to represent their school – something which they may not be able to do if the program wasn't in place. This includes severely autistic children who struggle with communication and social skills; the types of activities they are introduced to as part of this program give them starting points and confidence in life.

The Partnership also provides substantial training opportunities to support the development of young people around sports leadership, equipping young people with skills to enter employment – inspiring generations through activity and sport which is viewed as priceless.

As mentioned previously, the dual sports halls within Gateshead Leisure Centre facility are fully utilised for these sessions and include tiered seating for spectating, with no alternatives available should the centre close, which will have a huge impact on the Gateshead community and schools across the Borough. They have tried to use Gateshead Stadium over the past 10 years but have never been successful as the facility is always in use.

There is also a general feeling of the council letting the community and young people down. Gateshead was once renowned for its leading approach to sports, offering quality mentorship and flagship facilities, and as a result of mismanagement and no forward thinking, this leading approach is now taking an unprecedented step backwards to the detriment of Gateshead communities.

The Gateshead Schools Sports Partnership have cited their concerns for the future of the service they provide; without Gateshead Leisure Centre, and no comparable alternative, they feel this important support, fundamental for schools in the area will disappear which will leave a huge gap for children in relation to their development both physically and emotionally, which undoubtably will become a burden on NHS services in the future.

Gateshead College

Gateshead College tend to use the Gateshead Stadium for their sports academy students; however, they are concerned about the future if the stadium should close, this will have a huge detrimental impact on the college, sporting academia and Gateshead in general.

The college also fully supports the Primary Schools views within the session, *looking at it more widely, you know your pupils today in the future are our students tomorrow* - supporting how fundamental the right provision is made for children to learn and grow through sport and leisure activities being available to them.

Additional Needs Groups

The focus group session included representation from various organisations across the Gateshead borough and who will all be heavily impacted by the potential closure of Leisure facilities.

Cedars Trust & Gateshead Kestrels

Cedars Trust is a specialist provision for young people aged 3 to 19 years with varying degrees of additional educational, physical, and emotional needs, located close to Gateshead Leisure Centre. Gateshead Kestrels also form part of the Cedars Trust – the Kestrels is a community sports and physical activity club that caters for people with disabilities. The majority of children involved with the Trust are Gateshead residents.

The Trust uses Gateshead Leisure Centre three times per week for Key Stage 2 through to Key Stage 4 swimming. They also had access to Birtley Swim Centre until recently. They currently have two-hour slots for Gateshead which they privately hire at expense of £13K per annum.

They have a small hydrotherapy pool internally (5m x 1m deep) which they use for Key Stage 1 learning and then they transfer to the larger pools for Key Stage 2. Cedars has also regularly attended national Disability Swimming Competitions as a result of the swimming pathway they provide for their children which potentially will not happen if they cannot access pools moving forward.

Access to the facilities is so important for these children. Kestrels is viewed as being the best within the region for providing opportunities for children with additional needs. It has seen Paralympians pass through its doors, with Josef Craig referred to as one of its competitive successes, winning gold in the 2012 Olympics – there are

concerns that without the support of leisure facilities in the area, what future do aspiring Paralympians have? It takes away a priceless opportunity for these children.

The Kestrels has also encouraged children into employment, with some working in Gateshead Leisure facilities as lifeguards as well as within other facilities and schools.

A lot of children who are in mainstream schools but who have learning difficulties use the Kestrels as a release to perform and feel confident about their potential, and ability to swim which is so important for their emotional wellbeing as well as providing them with life skills as they move into adulthood.

Gateshead Leisure Centre is very well equipped for people with disabilities, they have hoists, suitable changing rooms, and wide facilities to accommodate wheelchairs. The centre also is unique because it can cater for children at all stages of swimming at the same time, utilizing the small and large pools together for all children.

Adult Social Care

ABC is a model which looks after adult social care and provides Phoenix as a service. This service provides people with additional needs to access to a room within the Gateshead Leisure Centre to meet and is used as a hub on a daily basis. All users are Gateshead residents.

Lots of the people they work with do not have any social support or community around them, so this is a lifeline and a safe place to meet for vulnerable people and gives them confidence to have an element of independence. They also use the library too, as well as the other on site leisure facilities. All of the staff within the Gateshead Leisure Centre and infrastructure around the centre are familiar with all of the adults that are involved with ABC which is priceless as they are comfortable and feel part of a community and society. Without the Leisure Centre as a hub, they have no central place to meet, which will have a huge negative impact on adult social care support.

A lot of those who access Phoenix use public transport to the Gateshead Interchange, which then involves a short walk to the Leisure Centre. Having the Civic Centre within the area too means that social care is also accessible for those that need it.

ABC are required to 'travel train' the people on a specific route that is familiar to them from home to central Gateshead, using landmarks etc. so they know they are safe on that route. Many have been trained to use the route from home to the Gateshead Leisure Centre. To access another leisure centre, will involve retraining individuals to get used to a new route which can take time and can cause a lot of stress and confusion for all concerned. The process could take up to six months for each person and will involve having to utilise more staff to roll the travel training out.

The group has raised concerns about footfall figures quoted in the Cabinet report and feel these should be representative of pre-Covid levels.

Ways to Wellness

Ways to Wellness is a social prescribing service who work with the Great North Children's Hospital to offer emotional and practical support for families with children who have additional needs. A lot of the support they provide is factored around leisure centre provision and is detailed below.

The group has indicated that most families they deal with are under financial strain, particularly those with social care responsibilities who are unable to work. The Go Gateshead card is a fantastic benefit for these families as it is affordable, and they can use it independently to access leisure facilities within the Borough.

Swimming is regarded as such an important exercise for children with disabilities – it is low impact activity which all abilities can be involved in. Furthermore, the wellbeing of parents and siblings of children with additional needs is also important, they often access gym and leisure facilities within Gateshead Borough to relieve stress.

As heard in other groups, the Interchange in Gateshead and its close proximity to the Leisure Centre provides accessible routes for a lot of their families.

The waiting lists for counselling sessions are so long, so being able to access activities through leisure is huge for the emotional wellbeing of at home carers to be able to function and offer the care they need for their loved ones.

Ways to Wellness are also exploring the option to form a swim group to assist families with children who have disabilities in helping their children to swim. They have the support from Newcastle Council to run the sessions, but to date, nothing

from Gateshead Council – there is concern this will now not happen due to the anticipated closures and capacity issues within the remaining leisure centres.

Impact

There is major concern over Kestrels swimming folding which is possible if the facilities close. It is described as being physiotherapy for disabled children without them knowing, and to date, there is no other group like it in the UK which supports children in the way that they do. They have also been nationally recognised for their successes in sport, nurturing talent for many years.

Many have mentioned that during Covid, and without swimming, children were in more pain due to lack of mobility – it is a necessity for these children. They have a fun time too which is paramount for their wellbeing in addition to the physical benefits - *If the children had a voice, they would say they are devastated at the thought of the Kestrels not being able to continue*

There is also a worry for adults who require social care support, if they don't have Gateshead Leisure Centre, they will become less independent, and confidence will wain which will have a substantial negative impact on this community.

Again, worries around capacity are a major concern for all, how are all the schools and organisations in the area going to be able to hold the same amount of sessions – there is just no way to accommodate everyone within three pools. Timing is also important – two-hour sessions will take longer if Cedars are to travel to another pool which isn't feasible to fit within their timetable.

For non-school groups there is also a concern that schools will take up all swim times which won't allow for public swimming too which will affect adults with social care needs.

A lot of families do not have access to transport, so moving further out of central Gateshead will result in logistical and financial challenges, with many unable to continue to swim or use leisure facilities.

There are concerns about higher costs going to another facility which will have a huge financial effect on package of care budgets.

As heard amongst other groups, the social impact and behavioral changes anticipated are a concern which will undoubtedly effect mental health services and the already exasperated waiting lists, the likes of SIPS will increase as well as

physiotherapy sessions for those who already have limited mobility. Rise in obesity is also a concern moving forward.

Support

The Cedars Trust is looking into what they can do internally, to build their own facilities, but this will take time to put in place, so there is concern in the short term.

There is a request to prioritise children and people with disabilities to be able to access the remaining Leisure Facilities and discount those membership fees to offset the additional transportation costs.

Keep the Go Gateshead Leisure Card – leisure is not a luxury it's a necessity and the card has to be ring fenced for people with disabilities and their families to encourage them to go to other facilities.

Many also need help to plan what the alternatives will be and how they will access them – there is no communication about what this will look like to help support those groups and organisations affected.

Jewish Community

Representatives across the Jewish community included those involved with schools and swim clubs, all who reside within the Gateshead Borough.

The Community is devoutly religious, with modesty of the utmost importance. The community comprises of c.5000, with the average household size around 6.6 for this community vs. 2.2 average across the country. As a result, children are living in crowded accommodation. Many families do not have their own transportation and rely on accessing public facilities and schools on foot.

The central location of Gateshead Leisure Centre is within walking distance for most families within the community and is described as being the biggest asset to the area. Facilities within close proximity to their homes is an important consideration as antisemitism is often a safety concern for many, should they have to travel far from their homes.

In addition to this, there is a cultural requirement for the community to have gendered swimming sessions. None of the other Gateshead pools can provide the required modesty of the Gateshead Leisure Centre set up where public viewing can

be avoided - going to other Leisure Centres is simply not an option for this reason. The centre also accommodates well attended single sex sessions which is understood to be the only centre in the Borough to offer this option.

As also outlined by the Additional Needs group, the Jewish Community cite Gateshead pool as unique in its set up, as it has three separate pools to accommodate different groups at the same time which is perfect for families. They too have also expressed how well the facilities accommodate children with disabilities in terms of accessibility compared with other centres in the Borough.

The Community privately hire the Gateshead pool facility on a regular basis outside school hours to accommodate swimming lessons for children, with approximately 40 children in sessions every 30 minutes. Friday morning sessions also accommodate up to 90 boys as well as many other sessions taking place throughout the week. It also allows them to ensure children meet the national curriculum requirements for swimming.

In addition to the pool, male college students also hire the sports halls and other facilities in the centre as well as the halls being rented twice per year for conventions and weddings. The only area which is not used is the gym, as it is mixed gender. All sessions across the facility are privately hired by the community, with pool rental costs charged at £117 per hour on Sundays and £84 per hour on Fridays.

It is apparent that sessions have been cut down significantly since Covid, with four female-only sessions reduced to one 45 minute session. Lessons for those with additional needs have also been cut and although alternatives have been researched, no options are available. This has resulted in children not having accessed a pool for over two years. Pre-Covid, the community had also additional unmet demand for services. Feedback also suggests that the footfall figures used in the Cabinet report are incorrect and do not account for private group bookings. There is a feeling that pre-Covid usage figures should be used as they more accurately reflect demand.

In addition to pool times being cut, there are frustrations re. other services that have not re-opened or have been significantly cut back post-Covid, including reduced hours for soft play, which was extremely popular pre-Covid, also the café has never reopened. No marketing activities seem to have been communicated to announce reopening or promote activities. Pre-booking the facilities does not take into consideration that this community has limited access to media and the internet.

When they call to book, no one answers, so it is always a difficult task to pre-book sessions.

There is also a general feeling of gross mis-management and no forward thinking on Gateshead Council's part. A lot of work could have been done to protect the leisure centres through effective business management, commercial and marketing plans which seem to have not been thought through.

Many have talked about a 'no can do' attitude from the council and staff, with many ideas and requests to utilise and rent the facility often disregarded which adds to the frustration over the decision to close as it has not been fully utilised for months.

Impact

Should Gateshead Leisure Centre close, there is a significant concern over the mental and physical wellbeing on the community and future generations. Removing access to these facilities will have a detrimental impact, especially on children and young adults, depriving the Community of its primary exercise hub. As the community is strictly religious, they do not encourage or access mainstream media or mixed gender activities that many other communities would; leisure is one of the main social activities that encourages social interaction in a safe environment.

As mentioned previously, the central location of Gateshead Leisure Centre is easily accessible for the community, and a short distance from home for many. The community feels safe within their own residential area, they have good relationships with the staff and wider businesses that surround them. To access other leisure facilities, would mean travelling on public transport which is a concern for parents and children, due to safety concerns and potential antisemitism abuse from members of the public. There are also concerns over what impact the closure will have on the non-Jewish community, with fear of increased anti-social behaviour which in turn could increase antisemitism.

As heard amongst all groups, there is confusion over public health aiming to reduce health inequalities, yet this action of closure is viewed as being contradictory to that message; cutting swimming and leisure activities will increase inequalities significantly such as confidence, weight loss, motor skills etc. – swimming is described as being the highlight of the week for many children and will be a significant loss to the Jewish Community. The thought of closure is causing anxiety amongst the community with many worried about what will replace this void.

There are concerns over capacity in other leisure facilities, with many skeptical as to how they can possibly accommodate all schools, communities, groups and public into fewer centres. Furthermore, the financial impact is significant on families, with many unable to afford transportation costs in addition to session costs, as well as the impact of travel time to accommodate private sessions outside school hours.

Ultimately, Gateshead Leisure Centre is viewed as being a necessity for this community and if it closes, the longer term impact on the community, social and public services will be greater.

Solutions

There are suggestions to keep the pool open and close the remainder of the centre to reduce running costs and maximise the commercial opportunity with the pool to include more sessions (single gender, child swim lessons etc.)

Asset Transfer was referred to during the session, but realistically if this was to happen, the community would require at least twelve months to look at a viable business plan.

7.0 Appendix

GSSP Event Attendance Figures @ Gateshead Leisure Centre (2022-23 Academic Year)

Month	Event Title	No. of Pupils
Nov-22	KS1 Indoor Athletics (AM)	80
	KS1 Indoor Athletics (PM)	76
	Year 9/10 Sportshall Athletics	72
	Year 5/6 Sportshall Athletics (Qualifier 1)	208
	Year 5/6 Sportshall Athletics (Qualifier 2)	200
	Year 5/6 Sportshall Athletics (Qualifier 3)	211
	Year 5/6 Sportshall Athletics (Qualifier 4)	140
Dec-22	Gymnastics Festival	349
	TOP Sportsability Paralympic Sport Festival	136
	Year 7 Sportshall Athletics (Boys)	54
	Year 7 Sportshall Athletics (Girls)	48
	Year 8 Sportshall Athletics (Boys)	48
	Year 8 Sportshall Athletics (Girls)	40
	Year 5/6 Sportshall Athletics (FINALS)	125
	KS1 Indoor Athletics (AM)	100
	KS1 Indoor Athletics (PM)	100

	Year 5 Playground Leader Training (AM)	100	
	Year 5 Playground Leader Training (PM)	90	
	Gateshead Leadership Academy	64	
Jan-23	Year 5/6 BEE Netball (Qualifier 1)	80	
	EYFS Multi Sport Festival (AM)	100	
	EYFS Multi Sport Festival (PM)	90	
	Year 5/6 BEE Netball (Qualifier 2)	80	
	Indoor Rowing Championships (Boys)	100	
	Indoor Rowing Championships (Girls)	100	
	Year 5/6 BEE Netball (Qualifier 3)	80	
	Leadership Workshop Day	64	
	Feb-23	TOP Sportsability Boccia (Qualifier 1)	140
		TOP Sportsability Boccia (Qualifier 2)	140
Year 5/6 Bee Netball (FINALS)		60	
KS1 Multisport Festival (AM)		80	
KS1 Multisport Festival (PM)		100	
Mar-23	KS1 Multisport Festival (AM)	100	
	KS1 Multisport Festival (PM)	90	
	KS1 Multisport Festival (AM)	100	
	KS1 Multisport Festival (PM)	100	
	TOP Sportsability Creative Performance (AM)	100	
	TOP Sportsability Creative Performance (PM)	80	
Apr-23	EYFS Multi Sport Festival (AM)	100	
	EYFS Multi Sport Festival (PM)	100	
	Key Step Gymnastics	250	
May-23	Primary Panathlon (AM)	52	
	Primary Panathlon (PM)	52	
	Secondary Panathlon	40	
	TOP Sportsability Multi Sport Festival	100	
		4719	

Key	
	Actual Figures based on event attendance
	Provisional based on entries to date and historical data