



## **SPECIAL CABINET**

### **MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2025 AT 10AM**

Councillor S. Morgan – Chair

Councillors:

J. Pritchard (Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Transformation), N. George (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Highways), P. Leonard (Cabinet Member for Planning and Public Protection), E. Stenner (Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance), C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities), S. Cook (Cabinet Member for Housing) and E. Forehead (Cabinet Member for Social Care – for part of the meeting).

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Chief Executive), M.S. Williams (Executive Director Corporate and Regeneration), G. Jenkins (Interim Director Social Services)

And:

Councillor A. Whitcombe (Chair Joint Scrutiny Committee Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee)

Also in Attendance:

L. Lane (Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), R. Hartshorn (Director of Environment and Regulatory Services), M. Lloyd (Director of Infrastructure and Waste Services), L. Donovan (Director of People Services), S. Harris (Director Financial Services and Section 151 Officer), L. Sykes (Deputy Director Financial Services), B. Winstanley (Director of Assets and Decarbonisation), S. Richards (Director Customer Economy and Regeneration Services), K. Cole (Chief Education Officer), L. Lucas (Director of Transformation, Digital and Procurement), K. Peters (Service Manager, Service Improvement and Partnerships), T. McMahon (Caerphilly Cares Manager), J. Lougher (Sport and Leisure Development Manager), and E. Sullivan (Democratic Services Manager)

And Speakers:

Councillors: K. Etheridge, C. Mann and S. Williams.  
Members of the Public: C. Beynon and M. Kamish.

### **RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS.**

The Leader reminded those present that the meeting was being live streamed, and a recording would be made available to view via the Council's website, except for discussions involving confidential or exempt items. [Click Here To View](#).

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.**

Councillor C. Morgan and E. Forehead (attended part of the meeting as an observer only)

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.**

Councillor C. Andrews declared a personal and prejudicial interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 4 Outcome of the Consultation on the Proposed Closure of Bedwas Leisure Centre, Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and New Tredegar Leisure Centre in that her husband works at one of the affected sites and left the meeting when the item was discussed and took no part in the debate or vote.

Councillor S. Morgan declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 5 To report on the Conclusion of the Consultation on the Draft Strategic Vision for the Library Service and Consider Recommendations for the Future of the Service within Community Hubs, as a former member of Nelson Community Council and current Member of Nelson Community Centre Management Board should Nelson Library close, they had agreed to work together on this as a community project. As this was a personal interest only Cllr Morgan could take full part in the debate and vote.

**3. OUTCOME OF THE CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED CLOSURE OF BEDWAS LEISURE CENTRE, CEFN FFOREST LEISURE CENTRE AND NEW TREDEGAR LEISURE CENTRE.**

Considered by Joint Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 12<sup>th</sup> May 2025.

Consideration was given to the report which advised Cabinet on the outcome of the public consultation on a proposal to close Bedwas Leisure Centre, Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and New Tredegar Leisure Centre.

Cabinet noted the impact that 14 years of austerity had on Council budgets which had led to the Council focusing on its essential statutory services. Cabinet was asked to note the context within which the report's proposals sat, and it was highlighted that Caerphilly residents had more access to leisure provision than any other Council area in Wales and the investment made in leisure provision since the adoption of the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy was highlighted. It was further noted that the investment made so far had seen rising usage figures year on year. The Sport and Active Recreation Strategy focused on maintaining four strategic sites placed across the County Borough, these sites would provide enhanced facilities for residents offering a wider range of provision with increased opening hours.

Cabinet was advised that the strategy sought to encourage healthy lifestyles and support residents to be more active more often and that although it might seem contradictory to propose the closure of some leisure facilities there was in fact an abundance of recreation activities available in numerous community spaces.

Cabinet noted the feedback on the public consultation process and noted the robust feedback from the Joint Scrutiny Committee held on the 12<sup>th</sup> May 2025 with the majority of Members in favour of retaining Cefn Fforest and New Tredegar Leisure Centres and had urged Cabinet to consider other alternatives to closure.

The Chair of the Joint Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Andrew Whitcombe addressed Cabinet and summarised the feedback from the meeting. Councillor Whitcombe confirmed that the majority of the Committee supported the retention of New Tredegar and Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and advised that the Committee had heard statements from very passionate supporters of Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and the impact this would have on all the users of the facility.

Mrs Cindy Beynon addressed Cabinet as a local resident in support of Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre. Mrs Beynon spoke passionately about the importance of Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre to the community and highlighted its role in providing opportunities for support and connection for four generations of her family. Mrs Beynon emphasised the impact the closure would have on various community groups, including children, the elderly and those recovering from illness who used the facilities to aid rehabilitation and recovery.

Councillor Shane Williams addressed Cabinet as the Local Ward Member for Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and highlighted the importance of the leisure centre to its resident not only to the children of the area, and Additional Learning Needs groups like 'The Sparrows' who had spoken at Joint Scrutiny and but also elderly members of the community. Councillor Williams spoke strongly about the depth of feeling within the community and the devastating impact its closure would have and emphasised the need to keep the Leisure Centre open as an integral part of the whole community. Councillor Williams referenced a petition submitted by residents in support of the Leisure Centre and urged Cabinet to delay the proposal so that as many options as possible to keep the Leisure Centre open could be explored.

Councillor Kevin Etheridge addressed Cabinet and reiterated the strength of the community support for Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre, emphasising its role as a 'community hub' and suggested that the Council explore alternative options such as reallocating funds from car parking charges and exploring partnership opportunities with charitable organisations such as Halo Leisure Services rather than closure.

Having taken into account the comments of Joint Scrutiny Committee and the representations made by speakers, in order to continue to make potential savings whilst addressing the community concerns, an amendment to recommendation 3.2 (2) of the Officer's report was moved and seconded that Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre be kept open but with the closure of the fitness suite and greatly reduced opening hours, 4pm to 8pm on weekdays, and 4 hours on a Saturday and on a Sunday from the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025 making a potential saving of circa £200k and an amendment to recommendation 3.2 (3) of the Officer's report, to keep New Tredegar Leisure Centre open but with reduced hours from the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025. By show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

Cabinet requested an overview of the Council's financial position and the financial challenges it faced. The Director of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer highlighted the Council's need to make £29m worth of savings over the next two financial years and emphasised emerging financial pressures such as national insurance contributions, pay awards and rising costs in social care and temporary accommodation. The Officer emphasised the importance of making difficult decisions to avoid further financial challenges.

Responding to a question regarding the progress that the Council had made in implementing the Active Sport and Recreational Strategy, Officers confirmed that significant progress had been made including investment in open spaces, country parks, sports pitches, 3G pitches but advised that the rationalisation of leisure centres into 4 strategic hubs had not progressed as well as other areas. It was further noted that £5.5m had been invested in leisure provision since 2019, including collaboration with partners to leverage in additional funding. The way in which Leisure Services co-ordinates bookings for shared school facilities was outlined and how this ensured that community clubs and local sports clubs accessed high quality facilities was detailed and Cabinet noted how this coordination allowed for equitable use of school sites for both school and community purposes.

Clarification was sought as to how closing leisure centres could improve long-term access to high-quality, sustainable leisure services. Officers explained that the strategy focused on investing in fewer but better facilities which were more financially sustainable and accessible. Further clarification was then sought as to whether the 97,000-figure quoted in relation to Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre related to number of users or visits and it was confirmed that this figure related to number of visits not individual users.

In relation to Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre and the reasons why it had been proposed for closure, Officers explained that the centre had high running costs, aging infrastructure and limited offer, albeit that facilities like the learner pool were highly valued by the community. Cefn Fforest was also a stand-alone site making it more expensive to run than sites that shared costs with schools. Leisure Centres with pools were also noted to be more expensive to run, for example this centre net running costs were £441,000 plus maintenance costs which equated to net running costs of £500,000 a year just for this one facility.

Cabinet then sought further information on the reports' integrated impact assessments, and it was explained that the assessments were used to identify possible impacts and offer mitigation against those impacts. For instance, the assessment had identified that longer travel distances and times to the 4 strategic hubs as a possible impact, however the strategic sites would offer a wider range of facilities and services, accessibility improvements and longer opening hours in mitigation.

Responding to a question in relation to the consequences of failing to make such difficult decisions as those before Cabinet, the Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer explained the statutory responsibility of the Council to approve a balanced budget on an annual basis. The Officer cautioned that if difficult decision were not made the Council's approach would become reactive, leading to cuts across the board and reductions in service levels. In a worst-case scenario, the Council might be at risk of issuing a section 114 Notice if balanced budgets were not achieved. In this event Commissioners would be appointed to take over the running of the Council and facilitate the required cuts.

In response to the suggestion that income from car parking fees could be reallocated to Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre, Officers explained that this income was used to underpin the highway maintenance budget which if diverted would need to be replaced with funding from elsewhere or see highway maintenance and services dramatically reduced.

In response to the query as to whether any discussions had taken place with Halo Leisure Services, Officers confirmed that there had not been any direct discussions with the organisation regarding the proposed closures. Cabinet emphasised the Council's commitment to direct delivery of sport and leisure services and the challenges faced by other Councils that had outsourced these services were noted.

Following consideration of the report, representations made at the meeting and considering the views of Joint Scrutiny Committee, it was then moved and seconded that the recommendations contained in the Officer's report subject to the aforementioned amendments to recommendations 3.2 (2) and 3.2 (3) be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers report:

1. The outcome of the 7-week public consultation exercise from 22nd January 2025 to 12th March 2025 and the associated Integrated Impact Assessments set out within this report be noted.
2. The closure of Bedwas Leisure Centre to coincide with the opening to the public of the Caerphilly Leisure and Wellbeing Hub, currently anticipated to be March 2027 be approved.
3. Cefn Forrest Leisure Centre be kept open but with the closure of the fitness suite and greatly reduced opening hours of 4pm to 8pm on weekdays and 4 hours on a Saturday and on a Sunday from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025 making a potential saving of circa £200k.
4. New Tredegar Leisure Centre be kept open but with reduced hours from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025.

**4. TO REPORT ON THE CONCLUSION OF THE CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT STRATEGIC VISION FOR LIBRARY SERVICES AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE SERVICE WITHIN COMMUNITY HUBS.**

Consideration was given to the report which sought to update Cabinet on the conclusion of the consultation on the draft Strategic Vision for Library Services and make recommendations for the future of the service within Community Hubs. Cabinet was asked to note that the review included 2 phases of consultation, and the recommendations contained within the Officer's report had been developed based on the data and consultation responses, benchmarking other library authorities and considered the statutory need to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service. Cabinet further noted the review's aim to deliver a more resilient and sustainable service while at the same time making improvements for customers by integrating the service into a town centre-based Community Hub model following the successful pilot at Rhymney Library Hub.

It was explained that the current service model is no longer sustainable, single staffing of library sites meant less ability to deliver a full range of library activities and limited opening hours, combined with lunch time closing which was unpopular with library users. It was further noted that the service was struggling to maintain advertised opening hours across all 18 sites with cover often only achieved through the goodwill of the staff and the Cabinet commended Library Staff for their commitment to service provision.

The Chair of the Joint Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Andrew Whitcombe addressed Cabinet and summarised the feedback from the meeting. Cabinet was updated on the passionate debate and representations from the public on the Library proposals. Councillor Whitcombe confirmed that the Joint Scrutiny Committee considered the eight recommendations relating to the Library Service and confirmed that a motion was proposed and seconded to amend recommendation 4, which in turn would supersede recommendations 4, 5, 6 and 7. The motion was accepted, leading to a vote on only four recommendations. The Joint Scrutiny Committee supported the Library Services' strategic vision, the development of Tier 1 and Tier 2 community hubs but also resolved to defer the closure of libraries and work with communities to bring forward detailed proposals for replacement library services.

A petition against the closure of Abertridwr Library was acknowledged by the Leader.

Mariam Kamish addressed Cabinet on behalf of the Save Abertridwr Library Campaign and spoke passionately about the importance of the library to the community as a vital space for children, pensioners and various community activities. Cabinet was asked to take into consideration the strength of feeling that the community of Abertridwr had for its' library, as it offered not only traditional library services but also a warm and welcoming environment for all ages to come together in a unique building that could not be found elsewhere. Children had a quiet place to do homework, access to the internet for those in digital poverty and a haven for older people to come together and share common interests like the 'knit and natter' group. Ms Kamish argued that Community Hubs would not work for her community and asked Cabinet to consider the impact on smaller villages like Abertridwr when essential facilities like libraries were moved out to larger towns. It would not be possible for young children and families to make the extended and expensive public transport journeys to the proposed 'Hubs'. Ms Kamish urged Cabinet to find the necessary funds to keep libraries open and suggested that reserves could be used to temporarily fund libraries whilst additional funding opportunities were explored and strongly emphasised the community's willingness to fight to keep the library open.

Councillor Colin Mann addressed Cabinet on behalf of the community of Llanbradach and their quest to save Llanbradach Library from closure. Councillor Mann emphasised the importance of local libraries and drew attention to the fact that Llanbradach Library had nearly

10,000 visits despite its limited opening hours. Councillor Mann further highlighted that the 10 libraries proposed for closure had over 110,000 visits collectively and that if these visits were to be directed to the 'Hubs' then they would become vastly overcrowded. He urged Cabinet to consider that although not a statutory service the service that they provided for communities was vital, especially for schools and school children that cannot easily access libraries further away. Councillor Mann urged Cabinet to work with communities to find ways to keep these libraries open whilst saving resources.

Cabinet referred to a typographical error in reference to Abertridwr Library and assurance was sought that the data contained within the IIA did in fact relate to the village in question. Officers confirmed that the data and consultation responses did relate to the village in question. The administrative error had been corrected and the IIAs hyperlinked in the report before Cabinet was the full and final set.

Clarification was sought in relation to what support and guidance would be available to community groups from property and library services should they wish to pursue community asset transfer. Officers explained that library services would work with any interested community groups to transfer book stock, shelving and other equipment if required. This could be via the current premises, after a community asset transfer, or at any other premises in the community. Computer equipment purchased by community grant could also be repurposed and donated. The Community Librarian would also provide support to independent community libraries via drop-in sessions and order/collect services, or a Community Collection at those sites. In terms of community asset transfer it was noted that there was a dedicated Officer for community asset transfer, providing access to property, legal, business support, community cares, financial guidance and third sector organisations to community groups. Cabinet noted that although Officers could not write Business Cases for them, there was a package of support that would be provided, and this support would be ongoing around statutory maintenance, sustainability and grant streams.

Cabinet sought further detail on how the proposed tier one and tier two hub models would be developed. Officers confirmed that not wishing to pre-empt Cabinet's decision, some planning had already started with property services looking at potential reconfiguration. £100,000 had been secured from the shared prosperity fund for works at each site. Census data and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation is being used to determine the specific needs of the community and from there a programme of engagement with partners and communities has started and would be ongoing throughout the development of the hubs. Work had begun to look at the identifying initial service providers, and this would be the most appropriate access to services through the hub. Tier two hubs would develop differently, primarily due to the space available in those buildings. A referral process into service would ensure that residents get the support they need.

Cabinet sought further information on the success of the Rhymney Hub given that it had been operating for a full year. Officers explained that the hub opened in January 24 and looking at the full year figures the increase in visitor numbers was 87%, approximately 16,000 more people. 40 more partners we are using the hub, including council services, Pobl, Gwent Police, Lloyds Bank and a wide variety of community groups, The offer is diverse and open to all., The stock issue had gone up by 11% and 252 people had been supported holistically through the 'What Matters' conversation approach.

Responding to a query in relation to schools' access to library services, Officers confirmed that schools were generally well-resourced with access to books and digital resources. The Director for Education stated that while schools no longer had dedicated library rooms, there was central access to library services, and the Officer had never visited a school where children couldn't access books. Literacy took many forms with an increasing use of digital resources, but that there was still a balance between IT and books. Cabinet noted that schools supported children in extending their learning outside the school day, and ensuring that children had access to computers, The Director of Education confirmed that every single school made sure that children were provided with access to a device so that they can study

outside the school day. . Many secondary schools are participating in the RADY project to support pupils with homework in a customised way. There as some innovative work going on in community-focused schools particularly, with involvement in the hub at Rhymney.

Cabinet once more sought clarification as to the consequences should the Council fail to make these difficult decisions and the Director of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer explained the Council's statutory responsibilities to approve balanced budgets and the emerging pressures facing the Council going forward and felt it important to emphasise that dipping into reserves was not the answer for balancing budgets and could in fact put planned projects, like new school builds at risk.

Clarification was then sought on the Welsh Public Library Standards and how Caerphilly would compare to other Councils should the proposed closure of 10 libraries be approved. Officers advised Cabinet that the standards provided a series of measure by which Welsh Government can compare the performance of library authorities over time and against other authorities. The standards allow service to consider things like benchmarking and also to learn from other library authorities and are used for improvement purposes. It was noted that the new 7<sup>th</sup> framework focused on the impact libraries have on communities, through contextual information, and had not yet run for a full year, so it would be hard to say now what the effect would be in terms of comparison, however many Councils were facing similar service reductions. The report showed an assessment of where officers think performance may alter.

Cabinet asked why the preferred model of Independent Community Libraries was selected in the report. Officers explained that the review recommendations were that this would give the right balance of self-determination and decision-making for interested community groups. The other models would require too much division of the limited library management capacity, and it was preferable to use that to help set up the proposed Community Outreach Service, to develop the service as part of hubs and help to set up Independent Community Libraries. Officers explained that other models would not meet the aims of the review; to put capacity into town centre hubs, to consolidate the library service resources and to provide savings to meet the overall Council shortfall. In helping to set up Independent Community Libraries the service would work with the group to understand what they need and if they group were willing would use the site for a location to deliver the Community Outreach Service.

Cabinet highlighted successful Community Asset Transfers already taking place and noted examples of where Council services such as Fleet Services, had been reshaped to achieve efficiencies and savings, believing that, given the strong feelings shown, libraries could continue to thrive without being Council-run, with the ability to access funding streams not available to the Council.

Following consideration of the report, the representations made at the meeting and considering the views of Joint Scrutiny Committee it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained therein be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously approved.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers report: -

1. The outcome of the second phase 7- week public consultation exercise from 22nd January 2025 to 12th March 2025 and the associated integrated impact assessments set out within the report be noted: -
2. **Recommendation 1** The Library Service Strategic Vision 2025-2028 be agreed.  
  
**Recommendation 2** The development of Tier 1 Community Hubs incorporating the Library Service at Bargoed, Blackwood, Caerphilly and Risca be agreed.

**Recommendation 3** The development of Tier 2 Community Hubs incorporating the Library Service at Newbridge and Ystrad Mynach be agreed.

**Recommendation 4** The closure of the following libraries, effective from the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025 be agreed: -

- 4a Aberbargoed
- 4b Abercarn
- 4c Abertridwr
- 4d Bedwas
- 4e Deri
- 4f Llanbradach
- 4g Machen
- 4h Nelson
- 4i Oakdale
- 4j Pengam

**Recommendation 5** The development of the Community Outreach Service and work with local communities and representatives of third sector buildings to find locations for the Community Collection, Community Librarian Outreach and Order and Collect service in smaller village locations be agreed.

**Recommendation 6** The properties recommended for closure surplus to the library service requirements be appropriated to Property Services for disposal, including through possible use by other services and Community Asset Transfer where appropriate, and negotiations to end leases at other sites be agreed.

**Recommendation 7** The service, in decommissioning closed library sites, will work with local communities who may be interested in organising an Independent Community Library to transfer stock, shelving and other equipment to community ownership be agreed.

**Recommendation 8** Responsibility for setting library service fees and charges be delegated to the Executive Director for Corporate and Regeneration in conjunction with the relevant Cabinet Member.

The meeting closed at 12.05 p.m.

Approved and signed as a correct record subject to any corrections made at the meeting held on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

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Chair