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Delivering with Less – Leisure Services – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Dave Wilson, Allison Rees, Lisa McCarthy, programme managed by Non Jenkins under the direction of Huw Rees.

Contents

The Council faces significant challenges to ensure that leisure services are delivered in a sustainable way to meet its residents needs.

Summary report

Summary	4
Proposals for Improvement	5
The Council faces significant challenges to ensure that leisure services are delivered in a sustainable way to meet its residents needs	6
The Council has made savings since outsourcing its leisure services in 2014, but this model has not delivered as originally intended and faces ongoing financial challenges	6
In 2018, the Council carried out a full review of its leisure services, but timescales were too compressed to fully develop the options and the review timescale had to be extended	9
The Council now has limited time to develop and deliver a sustainable model	14

Summary report

Summary

- 1 In October 2014, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (the Council) outsourced its leisure services to the Life Leisure Trust which operates under the trading name of Aneurin Leisure (the Trust). The Trust is responsible for the operation, management and development of indoor and outdoor sport and leisure facilities, sport and arts development, arts venue, country parks, libraries and community learning centres across Blaenau Gwent. In this report, we use the term leisure services to mean these services provided by the Trust.
- 2 In 2018, the Council undertook a review of the services provided on its behalf by the Trust and considered three future management and delivery options:
 - a. Trust to remain with a 5-year tapering budget;
 - b. all services returned to the Council;
 - c. an alternative Service Delivery Model.
- 3 Between June and December 2018, we 'shadowed' the Council's leisure review by observing meetings, reviewing documents and interviewing key officers and members.
- 4 Our review concluded that **the Council faces significant challenges to ensure that leisure services are delivered in a sustainable way to meet its residents needs**
- 5 We came to this conclusion because:
 - a. the Council has made savings since outsourcing its leisure services in 2014, but this model has not delivered as originally intended and faces ongoing financial challenges;
 - b. in 2018, the Council carried out a full review of its leisure services, but timescales were too compressed to fully develop the options and the review timescale had to be extended; and
 - c. the Council now has limited time to develop and deliver a sustainable model.

Proposals for improvement

- 6 The table below contains our proposals for ways in which the Council could improve the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and the sustainability of its leisure services to make it better placed to meet current and future challenges.

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
Learning from the existing leisure services arrangement:	
P1	Ensure that learning from the current Trust arrangement is considered when establishing the new leisure services arrangement; including <ul style="list-style-type: none">ensuring that the Council's responsibilities stated within legal agreements for any outsourced services are clearly understood by officers and Members;clarifying and agreeing service development expectations as well as financial targets from the outset;ensuring financial targets are realistic and achievable; andmonitoring performance in a timely way so that the Council can foresee any potential poor performance or concerns over future financial sustainability of the arrangement in good time to take corrective action.
Learning that the Council can draw from the leisure service review process to inform its other service reviews:	
P2	Ensure that the Council's programme of service reviews work to realistic project scopes; including by ensuring that: <ul style="list-style-type: none">timescales are realistic and achievable;there is adequate and timely member involvement to allow for effective scrutiny;adequate resources are allocated to complete service reviews;options are well defined; andproposed options are fully costed with proposed timescales for implementation to support effective decision making.
Preparing for an alternative delivery model(s):	
P3	Put plans in place to ensure continuity of leisure services and smooth transition to sustainable and efficient alternative delivery model(s).

The Council faces significant challenges to ensure that leisure services are delivered in a sustainable way to meet its residents needs

The Council has made savings since outsourcing its leisure services in 2014, but this model has not delivered as originally intended and faces ongoing financial challenges

One of the the Council's key motivations to establish the Trust was to deliver financial benefits

- 7 In 2012, the Council started to consider alternative models for delivery of its Leisure Services. The Council's motivation for setting up a Trust was the need to make financial savings. During the three years prior to the transfer of leisure services in 2014, the service saved approximately £800,000 but could see no further significant opportunities to achieve financial savings in its leisure service other than through exploring externalisation of the service.
- 8 Between 2012 and 2014, the Council, with the support of an external consultant, reviewed leisure services within Blaenau Gwent. The review considered future delivery and management options and produced a business case evaluating the following five options:
 - a. Council retain Leisure Services;
 - b. establish a Not for Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO) for leisure services;
 - c. leisure services transfer to an existing NPDO;
 - d. leisure services transfer to a hybrid of Trusts; or
 - e. leisure services transfer to the private sector.
- 9 The Council decided to establish a Not for Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO) for leisure services. It anticipated that this would deliver financial savings through cost avoidance and potential additional income through savings on National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), VAT relief, access to lottery funding and charitable funding.

The Council established the Leisure Trust and soon made changes to the arrangements resulting in additional costs to the Council

- 10 On 30 September 2014, the Council approved the transfer of some leisure services to a Not for Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO). The NPDO, known as Aneurin Leisure Trust began operating on 1 October 2014. The following leisure services and assets transferred to the Leisure Trust:

- a. Adult and Community Learning;
- b. Arts Development and Venues (Metropole/Beaufort Ballroom);
- c. Brynmawr Community Centre;
- d. Heritage Sites and Heritage Urban Conservation;
- e. Libraries;
- f. Sport and Active Living;
- g. Parc Bryn Bach;
- h. Bedwellty House and Park; and
- i. Sports Centres.

11 The arrangement between the Council and the Trust was supported by four legal agreements as follows:

- a. Funding and Management Agreement;
- b. Business Transfer Agreement;
- c. Support Services Agreement: and
- d. Admission Agreement to participate in the Local Government Pension Scheme.

As planned, the Council has reduced the management fee it paid to the Trust to run its leisure service over the last four years. **Exhibit 2** sets out the management fee and the annual reductions since the Trust's inception in 2014.

Exhibit 2 shows the management fee paid to the Trust since 2014

	Year 1 2014/15 (October 2014 and March 2015) £	Year 2 2015/16 £	Year 3 2016/17 £	Year 4 2017/18 £	Year 5 2018/19 £
Annual Management Fee Budget	1,884,000	3,670,400	3,392,640	3,240,570	3,085,580
Annual management fee reduction		86,000	232,000	86,000	86,000

12 Since 2015, 11 leisure assets/services originally transferred to the Trust have returned to the Council: Four assets returned to the Council in 2015, five returned in 2016, one in 2017 and one in 2018. The Council has subsequently completed Community Asset Transfers for some of these assets.

13 The Council is responsible for the increase in Leisure Trust employee pension contributions and Leisure Trust staff redundancy costs, in total amounting to £904,483. These financial commitments and the unexpected return of 11 leisure services/assets to the Council costing £149,555, have resulted in additional costs to the Council of £1,054,038 since the transfer of leisure services.

- 14 During the first four years of the Leisure Trust, the Council asked the Trust to achieve additional financial savings.. The savings totalled £353,000 in addition to the annual reduction in management fee. In practice, the Leisure Trust has only been able to deliver part of these extra financial savings and this has created further cost pressures for the Council.
- 15 The Council estimated that by establishing a Trust it would save £5.27 million over the first five years of its operation. Whilst the Council has reported the overall savings position several times to various council forums throughout its recent service review, we found inconsistent variations in these reported savings. For example, a net saving of £677,962 was reported to Regeneration and Community Services Leadership team on 5 June 2018 (as stated within the 'Position Statement Leisure Trust 2018' report). The saving of £677,962 did not account for outstanding costs at that time of approximately £140,000 relating to the transfer back to the Council of Beaufort Theatre, non-payment of an outstanding invoice from the Trust, and the Trust being unable to meet the 2018-19 additional saving relating to staff reduction savings.
- 16 A month later in July 2018, the same Leadership team received another Leisure Trust position statement with different financial data. This report indicated a total cumulative saving of £6,028,000 between 2014-15 to 2018-19 with a total cost to the Council of £1,054,038 since the transfer of services to the Trust.
- 17 The Council has since clarified that the actual savings/cost avoidance since the establishment of the Trust is £4,211,962. This shows that the financial data provided during the review has been inaccurate.

The Council lacked a vision setting out the strategic direction for Leisure, and performance monitoring has not been fully effective.

- 18 The Council did not have a vision or strategy for the improvement of leisure services within Blaenau Gwent between 2014 and 2018. The Council's previous Leisure Strategy expired in 2014. In the absence of a vision for leisure services in Blaenau Gwent, the Trust had not produced a business plan setting out how it would deliver leisure services going forward, although this is a requirement of the funding and management agreement. As part of the Council's leisure services review, in November 2018, Council approved a draft Leisure and Cultural Strategy 2019-2029.
- 19 During our review we found that the Council had monitored performance of the Trust but this had not been effective. Council officers met Leisure Trust managers monthly, and the Leisure Trust provided regular performance reports to the Council. The Environment, Regeneration and Economic Development scrutiny committee received six monthly performance reports, however in practice these reports were not timely. For example, in October 2018, members received the September 2017 to March 2018 Leisure Trust performance report.
- 20 The performance information supplied by the Trust shows operational performance, such as number of visits to different leisure venues and activities and income and expenditure. This information had not been adequate to alert the

Council to potential concerns over the Trust's ongoing financial position. Between 2014 and March 2017, the Council's overall assessment of the Trust's level of performance was that it was good or high, with some areas requiring improvement. However, the September 2017- March 2018 performance report to Environment, Regeneration and Economic Development scrutiny committee in October 2018 highlighted a mixed picture of performance and some areas of concern especially related to the budget and financial situation.

An ongoing arrangement with the current provider is important for the continued delivery of leisure services until the Council decides on its new delivery model and this is in place

- 21 Maintaining the current relationship with the Trust is critical to ensure the continuation of leisure services. In addition, as per the Funding and Management agreement, if the Council actions its 29th November 2018 resolution that the Leisure Trust would not remain as is with a tapered budget reduction over the next five years 2019-24, it must agree an exit plan with the Leisure Trust 'covering the performance of the obligations of both parties during the exit and handover period'.¹
- 22 In Autumn 2018, following a pay award to staff working for the Leisure Trust, the Council agreed a payment of £50,000 to help finance this pay award.
- 23 Following the fieldwork for this review, the Trust wrote to the Council highlighting concerns with its current financial position and its impact on the sustainability of the business. The Council responded positively to these financial concerns and is working with the Trust to identify solutions. In December 2018, the Managing Director, in consultation with the Leader and Executive Member, under delegated authority, approved a payment of £100,000 to the Leisure Trust to partly offset the Leisure Trust's projected trading loss of £135,000. The decision was later ratified by Council. The Council agreed conditions with the Trust around this payment and is seeking to develop an improved working relationship with the Trust going forward.

In 2018, the Council carried out a full review of leisure services but timescales were too compressed to fully develop the options and the review timescale had to be extended

The Council decided to review leisure services and its arrangement with the Trust but initially misunderstood the timescales as stipulated in the Funding and Management agreement

- 24 The Funding and Management agreement requires a review of arrangements between the Council and Leisure Trust after four years. On 18 April 2018, however,

¹ Funding and Management agreement relating to the provision of Leisure, Culture and learning services paragraph 46.1.1

the Council's Executive decided to carry out a wider service review considering the future management and delivery of leisure services, rather than limiting itself to a review of the current arrangements with the Leisure Trust.

25 The Council misinterpreted the timescales set out in the Funding and Management agreement for a review of the current arrangements. The contract states July 2018, but initially the Council believed October 2018 would be the date to start a review. As a result, the Council commissioned external legal advice to review the Funding and Management agreement and to clarify its responsibilities. This misunderstanding of the legal requirements resulted in a compressed period in which the Council could complete and report the review findings. As reported to the Environment and Regeneration Leadership team and Corporate Leadership team in February 2018, the proposed timeline to complete the review was as follows:

- 12 March 2018 - Special Scrutiny Committee
- 18 April 2018 - Executive decision on undertaking a full Leisure services review
- 23 April – 15 June 2018 - Commission external professional support
- 18 June – 17 August 2018 - Explore options
- September 2018 - Present report on findings and recommendations to Scrutiny and Executive
- September 2018 - Advise Leisure Trust on Council proposals

The Council established a working group and commissioned external consultants to support its review

26 The Council had already committed resource in early 2018 to carry out the wider review of leisure services, prior to the Executive's decision to proceed with the review. It established a Leisure Review Working Group (LRWG) of senior managers, that included the S151 officer, Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance, lead Corporate Director, Head of Public Services and Head of Organisational Development, Leisure Services and Facilities Team Manager, Strategic Project Team Leader and a Trade Union representative. The purpose of this group was to:

- a. review the funding and management agreement (first five years business review) and for the next five years 2019-2024;
- b. identify any options that require review for the Trust and Leisure Services;
- c. negotiate amendments to contract conditions, if necessary;
- d. consider services at risk due to budget reduction over the coming years;
- e. set a clear vision for Leisure Services; and
- f. establish whether external support is required to undertake and support this work stream.

27 The options that the LRWG was asked to consider were:

- a. Leisure Trust to remain with tapered budget reduction 2019-2024;

- b. undertake de-scoping exercise on all Leisure Trust managed services;'
 - c. all services returned to Council;
 - d. investigate alternative providers for leisure services'; and
 - e. alternative service delivery models.
- 28 The Council recognised some gaps in skills and capacity and commissioned external consultants to support and advise its leisure services review.
- 29 The LRWG worked effectively. Given the tight timescales it now found itself in, it put significant effort into prioritising working group activity and meetings. Agenda's, relevant documents and minutes supported each working group meeting with meetings having good attendance. The LRWG had a clear focus on meeting tight deadlines and reported to senior managers routinely.
- 30 There was a change in Lead Officer of the LRWG during the Leisure Services review. Whilst there was an impact on the capacity of the LRWG in terms of officer numbers, there was a smooth transition between Lead Officers ensuring the continued and uninterrupted focus of the LRWG.
- 31 The consultants produced the draft evaluation matrix that the Council would later use to evaluate different delivery models. The LRWG challenged the draft evaluation matrix with the consultants providing several versions before the LRWG approved the final version.
- 32 The consultants also developed, consulted on and drafted the Council's Leisure and Cultural Strategy at the same time as the drafting of the evaluation matrix.

Original timescales to complete the review slipped creating pressure on officers, resulting in some changes to the review scope and reporting arrangements

- 33 At a joint Executive/Corporate Leadership Team meeting in July 2018, the Council consolidated the original five options into three options as follows:
- Leisure Trust to remain with a tapered budget reduction over next five years 2019-2024;
 - all leisure services to return to Council control; and
 - alternative service delivery models.
- 34 The original timescales (as shown in exhibit 3) slipped and original plans to report to members changed. This indicates that either the original timescales were over ambitious, or delivery of the review took longer than anticipated.. The LRWG worked at a pace to ensure the delays in reporting to members were minimised. In addition to fulfilling the timescales as set out in the Funding and Management agreement, officers were also aware that decisions on the future management and delivery of the Leisure Service could impact on 2019-20 and 2020-21 budgets. However, there was a compressed decision-making timescale which gave officers of the LRWG limited opportunity to respond to and action members comments from the Phase One report to the Phase Two report.
- 35 Reporting timelines to members were later than originally planned and were in two phases as follows:

- a. Phase One report – joint scrutiny – 18 October 2018
 - b. Phase One report – Executive – 31 October 2018
 - c. Phase One report – Council – 8 November 2018
- 36 Phase One report contained options on:
- a. the three management options;
 - b. Draft Leisure and Cultural Strategy 2019-2029; and
 - c. Draft evaluation matrix for the assessment of future management options.
- 37 The Phase two report included an assessment of each of the three management options using the agreed evaluation matrix of a 60:40 split between financial and non-financial criteria. The timing of the Phase Two report was as follows:
- a. Phase Two report – scrutiny – 20 November 2018
 - b. Phase Two report – Executive – 28 November 2018
 - c. Phase Two report – Council – 29 November 2018
- 38 Full Council ratified the officers' preferred management option of 'Alternative service delivery models' as the future delivery and management option for leisure services.
- 39 Accompanying the officer's report, was the external consultants review of the three management options. While the officer report contained limited information on both the financial implications and timescales to implement Council decision, the consultant's report provided additional detail.

There was limited information explaining short and long-term budget implications and timescales supporting the implementation of the three management options

- 40 The officer report setting out the results of the leisure services review, lacked details of short and long-term budget implications and timescales supporting the implementation of the three management options. The officer report to full council on 29 November 2018 stated:
- a. 'Option One – If the Council were to remain with the Leisure Trust with a tapered budget reduction over the next five years (2019-2024), it would need to agree a revised service fee via the provisions outlined within Funding and Management Agreement. The current management fee paid by the Council to the Trust is circa. £3.3 million per annum.
 - b. Option Two - Returning leisure services back to Council control would return the national non-domestic rates (NNDR) costs for the buildings at an estimated cost of £600,000 per annum and would be a significant cost pressure for the Council.
 - c. Option Three - Alternative service delivery models can potentially generate revenue savings and cost avoidance when compared to both the Council and current NPDO options. However, the operator will not receive any Mandatory Relief from NNDR as they are not a Charitable Trust. However, at the Council's discretion they may provide relief, and

this can be funded the same as the Trust option. If the alternative service delivery model chosen is to fully outsource the services provided by the Trust to a commercial operator, the likely timescales could be in the region of 12-18 month'.

- 41 The Council chose option (c), although this decision was based on limited financial data because it was unclear what the potential model(s) would be. It is unclear therefore how the Council applied its 60:40 split between financial and non-financial criteria agreed in the evaluation matrix.
- 42 In June 2018, the Council informed the Leisure Trust of the future annual tapered management fee from 2019-20 to 2023-24. Members did not receive this financial information in the Phase One or Phase Two leisure reports.
- 43 The consultants review of the management options given to full Council as an appendix to the Phase Two leisure review report on 29 November 2018, gave members an overview of the different procurement approaches such as, in-house, contract for services, concession contract, community asset transfer, property transaction and collaboration and partnership. The consultants recommended a procurement approach for each service. Members received the completed evaluation matrix including the weighting of each of the 11 criteria (split between financial and non-financial) and scoring (0-5) for each criteria.
- 44 The consultants also provided members with the outcome of their performance review of the Leisure Trust.

The review of Leisure Services lacked timely and meaningful scrutiny member involvement which limited effective scrutiny

- 45 Members expressed concerns, when discussing the Phase One Leisure report at the joint scrutiny committee on 18 October, about a lack of member involvement and limited engagement to date. Members noted that a Task and Finish group formed part of the leisure review during 2012-14, but not for this review in 2018.
- 46 Officers advised that it was too late in the review process for a Task and Finish group to be set up as it would delay decision-making by full Council. Instead, the scrutiny committee established a Strategic Working Group with five members.
- 47 Some members at the joint scrutiny meeting on 18 October 2018 were uncertain why the management options were reducing from five to three. Some members expressed concerns that two management options were no longer under consideration. This committee did not support the officers' preferred option and recommended that five management options remain.
- 48 The Council set up a member working group after the Phase One report was considered by Scrutiny Committee in October 2018. Although this did provide more opportunity for Members to engage in the process, it is unclear what impact the working group had on the review as its work was not referenced in the report to the Executive on 28 November.
- 49 On 31 October the Executive considered the scrutiny committee's recommendation but did not support this and approved three management options.

The Council is identifying some lessons for future reviews

- 50 During our fieldwork, officers and members reflected on this leisure review and identified lessons learnt. Primarily, those we interviewed as part of the review highlighted:
- a. The review needed more time to complete;
 - b. the same officers involved in several Council service reviews at the same time, so greater staff resources need to be allocated to undertake reviews; and
 - c. the need for robust contracts at the outset of outsourcing any Council service.
- 51 As part of this review, we also identified how the Council can learn from its own service review:
- a. member involvement is needed earlier in the review to provide members with background information, for example, through member briefings and Task and Finish groups, so members understand the process and focus on the information being presented.
 - b. ensure a full understanding of contract requirements and timescales to avoid misunderstanding legal requirements.
 - c. ensure greater clarity on implications and implementation of Council decision, eg timescales to implement decisions, what needs to happen, any costs associated with implementing decision and future budget implications.

The Council now has limited time to develop and deliver a sustainable model

- 52 The Council took approximately two years, between 2012 and 2014, to review and decide on the current delivery model for leisure services. In November 2018, the Council set itself 16 months to establish alternative delivery model(s).
- 53 The Council will need to have in place arrangements for the ongoing delivery of its leisure services. The Phase Two Leisure review report to Council on 29 November 2018 stated that the likely timescale to secure an outsourced operator as an alternative service delivery model, would be 12-18 months at a cost of approximately £100,000 dependent on how much the Council would be able to do in house in terms of procurement.
- 54 The current outsourced Leisure service areas are:
- a. Adult and Community Learning (ACL) and Libraries;
 - b. Leisure/Sports Centres;
 - c. Bedwellty House and Park;
 - d. Bryn Bach Park; and
 - e. Arts Development and the Metropole.

- 55 To action the Council's decision to seek alternative delivery model(s), these services may need separating. This could increase both the time and resource to fully action Council's decision.
- 56 At the time of our review, the Council did not have a clear project plan setting out how it will seek and deliver an alternative delivery model(s). A project plan will require updating regularly, outlining key activities, responsibilities and milestones to ensure the Council remains focussed and on time. The Council has already committed to extending the remit of LRWG to take forward the Council's decision to seek alternative delivery model(s). This working group has a significant volume of work to co-ordinate, complete and report on to ensure there is no disruption in the future delivery of leisure services.
- 57 On 29 November 2018 the Council agreed the way forward for leisure services, but the report to members did not convey the potential complexity of delivering this agreed option, which may involve some or all of the following steps:
- a. decide if services currently provided by the Trust need separating in readiness for any potential tender/procurement process;
 - b. determine how the leisure services could be procured, such as via one procurement separated into Lots per service or via individual procurement exercises;
 - c. decide on the length of contract for each service;
 - d. establish the value for the entire service and/or the annual contract value per separate leisure service;
 - e. comply with Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) procurement regulations if the value of the procurement exceeds the relevant threshold(s): (£181,302 for Supplies and Services, £4,551,313 for Works, £615,278 for Social and other specific services);
 - f. test the market to assess interest or undertake desk-based market research;
 - g. prepare tender documentation, including detailed specification/scope of services, per leisure service;
 - h. undertake procurement process(es) as required per leisure service, abiding to the obligatory OJEU timescales (as necessary based on value of procurement). The OJEU timescales are dependent on choice of procedure;
 - i. Open procedure: minimum 35 days (if no prior information notice (PIN) published, if PIN published timescale reduces to 15 days);
 - ii. Restricted procedure: 2 stages, both minimum 30 days (second stage can be reduced by adhering to specific processes);
 - iii. Negotiated procedure: as per Restricted procedure.

- i. as well as adhering to the timescales the Council would also have to include further time in the procurement process(es) for:
 - i. evaluation of responses;
 - ii. seeking internal approval at varying stages (as appropriate);
 - iii. notifying tenderers; and
 - iv. undertaking contractual negotiations with the successful provider(s).
- j. comply with TUPE requirements where appropriate;
- k. develop contracts with potential provider(s), having clear contract outcomes;
- l. establish future contract management arrangements with any new service provider(s);
- m. clarify from the outset the Council's vision and expectations for each service; and
- n. establish the total contract value for the entire service and/or the total contract value per separate leisure service if being procured individually. Total contract value meaning cost per annum for the length of the agreement.

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