

Environment
Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD

Report of: Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods

Date: 25 July 2023

Ward: Finsbury Park

Subject: Sobell Leisure Centre Facilities Changes

1. Synopsis

- 1.1. To set out the details and the outcomes of the consultation and engagement on the proposals for the Sobell Leisure Centre following the damage done by the flood in August 2022.
- 1.2. To set out the work done to review the viability of the ice rink following feedback as part of the consultation process.
- 1.3. To set out the reasons for the decision on what options to proceed with.

The Report comprises the following sections:

1. Background (Section 4)
2. Communication, Consultation and Engagement Methodology (Section 5)
3. Consultation Outcomes (Section 6)
4. Concerns expressed over prejudgment of the Consultation (Section 7)
5. Ice Rink Viability Options (Section 8)
6. Key Considerations for Decision (Section 9)
7. Inclusive and Accessible Sport and Leisure opportunities (Section 10)
8. Financial, Legal Environmental, Equalities Impact Implications (Section 11)
9. Conclusion and Reasons for Decision
 - Appendix 1 – Consultation
 - Appendix 2- Equalities
 - Appendix 3 – Exempt Financial and commercial considerations

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To note the results of the consultation with users and the wider community carried out between 26 May 2023 and 7 July 2023 and to thank all those who participated.
- 2.2. To note that the Executive resolved on 18 May 2023 that the Council was minded not to reinstate an ice rink at the Sobell Leisure Centre for the reasons set out in the accompanying report.
- 2.3. To note the various options available to the Council relating to the future use for the Sobell Leisure Centre following the serious impact of the Thames Water Mains Flood in August 2022.
- 2.4. To decide to progress the Active Zone option and not reinstate the ice rink at the Sobell Leisure Centre having regard to the reasons set out in the report.
- 2.5. To note that there are a number of regular users of the ice rinks and active clubs with members across London that will be affected by this decision and to agree the proposed mitigation measures set out in Section 8.33 to 8.35 to support their activities at the nearby Lee Valley centre.
- 2.6. To ensure an inclusive programme for sports and activities in the renewed Sobell Leisure Centre agree to produce a program of co-design activity to involve a broad and inclusive range of stakeholders including women and girls, as outlined in Section 10.

3. Date the decision is to be taken

- 3.1. This will be a delegated decision following the Executive Decision on 18 May 2023 to delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Resources in consultation with the Executive Member for Health and Social Care to decide the future uses of Sobell following the consultation.
- 3.2. Notice of the Decision was published in the Forward Plan on 1 June 2023 and the Decision is due to be made on 2 August 2023.

4. Background

- 4.1. In August 2022 Sobell Leisure Centre suffered a major flood as a direct result of a Thames Water Mains bursting on Tollington Road which has affected the entire ground floor of the Leisure Centre. This flood has caused major damage to the facilities and services on offer at the centre and both LBI and GLL have been engaging contractors and specialists in immediate remediation and in consultation with the insurers are developing a plan of reinstatement.

Strategic Context

- 4.2 In the recently adopted Islington Active Together Strategy the Council's vision is to empower our communities to be more physically active. The Strategy sets out three guiding principles:
- Focussing our resources on the residents who are least active and empowering them to become more active.
 - Challenging inequalities in access to, and participation in, physical activity. The service will focus on children and young people and the groups who are traditionally less likely to be physically active, including people living with a disability or long-term health conditions, Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, women and girls, older adults and people living in areas of higher deprivation.
 - Recognising the powerful impact that physical activity can have in preventing and managing a range of long-term health conditions, including supporting good mental health.
- 4.3 The proposals that are set out in this paper for the Sobell Leisure Centre are guided very much by these principles. The introduction of the trampoline park demonstrated the vital role that more informal leisure offers are to increasing usage levels and drawing in new audiences. A formal sports offer does not always appeal to all and making physical activity fun is critical in breaking down barriers, particularly for children and young people in being more physically active. The proposals could see a rise in usage levels of 250,000 people a year with a majority being the key target group of young people. It also has a broader appeal to a much wider demographic group enabling a much broader range of people to access physical activity.
- Some of the supporting evidence for this is:
- Sport England's Active Lives Survey of Young People for the academic year 2021/22 states 42.7% of 5–16-year-olds in Islington were active, which is less than the London average of 45.3%, and 36.4% were inactive, which is above the London average of 32.7%.
 - Islington's School's health and wellbeing team conducted online surveys and focus groups with 706 local girls in 2019, they found that the girls want fun activities, things they don't try in school. Most of all they enjoy being active with friends. The new products provide an ideal opportunity for targeted activity for secondary school girls and local youth clubs.
 - As of 2019 Finsbury Park was the most deprived ward in Islington. In addition to low-cost pricing GLL could work with local partners to ensure there are opportunities

available for low-income families during term time and the school holidays. This would include schools, children's centres, holiday programmes, Access to Sports, food banks and the local youth hubs.

- The proposed new facilities could support young people in Islington to be more active. There are 69,259 people aged 0-15 within 9 minutes travel of Sobell Leisure Centre.
- There were an estimated 12,220 children aged 0 to 4 years living in Islington in 2020/21 (Bright Start 2022). A higher percentage of these children live in the North and Central localities (39% and 37% respectively) compared to the South (24%).

- 4.4 This project talks directly to the Council's ambition to give its young people the best start in life, and to create a child friendly Islington as set out in the Islington Together 2030 plan where all children are able to keep physically active and thrive. The proposed interventions would see significant numbers of young people engaging in challenging physical activity who might never have considered engaging in sports at a leisure centre. The Council and GLL will ensure it focuses on these priorities and widen the focus on target groups to include for example looked after children, those with long term conditions and those with extreme healthcare needs to ensure that the most vulnerable children are able to access the facilities and engage in regular activity. It will use the opportunity to promote the Sobell as a space for local communities and in particular local families as well as women and girls. It will build on existing partnerships with organisations such as Age UK Islington and the Better Get Together sessions, Arsenal and the Walking Football and develop new partnerships with local community organisations and providers of services to families and young people through the Bright Start and Bright Lives teams, Family Hubs and youth services. The Saturday night youth nights would be re-launched working with Lift and Platform to support them to give young people safe access to facilities such as the Active Zone, gym and sports hall to participate in a range of sports and activities.

Current Situation

- 4.5 All the facilities/equipment and fixtures and fittings at Sobell including the Sports Hall, Trampoline Park and the Ice Rink, Squash courts, soft play area, Dojo have been condemned and written off and have been stripped out, including the full height central partition wall. This has been far more extensive than initially envisaged and has been a process that has taken time to establish the full extent of damage at each stage of the investigation and have that formally written off by the insurers.

4.6 Whilst it was originally envisaged that GLL would simply re-instate the damaged and lost facilities, the extent of the damage has meant that there is an opportunity to reconsider the facilities and offer at Sobell. The Trampoline Park facility is now 5 years old and there were plans to re-fresh the offer to keep it current and this also needs to be considered in the context of an extremely challenging operating environment for GLL with the impacts of inflation, the rise in utility costs, the cost-of-living crisis, and the impact of government austerity on Council budgets.

The Proposals

4.7 On the 18th of May 2023 the Executive made the decision to consult and engage with users and the wider community on the proposal not to reinstate the ice rink and to replace the lost facilities with a new offer to appeal to a wider user base to increase physical activity particularly by young people.

4.8 It decided that it was minded to not re-instate the ice rink. for several reasons:

- That it had been condemned and would cost a significant amount to re-instate (although covered by insurance).
- That in the 12 months preceding the flood it operated at a loss of £0.250m.
- That other facilities nearby threatened future demand including the new Lee Valley ice centre that has now re-opened.
- That ice is a high energy consumer resulting in a high carbon footprint of 113 tonnes.
- That usage levels were relatively low in comparison to other facilities (see section 8.8).

4.6 It was decided to delegate the final decision to the Corporate Director of Resources following the completion of the consultation and engagement exercise. This was in part due to the constraints of the timeframe for the insurers that is set out in the previous Executive report that sets a limit on the timeframe for a decision for what the insurers will cover, but in addition to ensure that GLL are able to commence work on the reinstatement to bring this important community asset back into full use.

4.7 The Sports Hall and Trampoline Park are having to be completely replaced and reinstated along with the steelwork to the mezzanine floor and central wall to the sports hall. This means there is a potential opportunity of reorientating the layout of the sports hall and the trampoline park which would not require the reintroduction of the mezzanine floors by moving the sports hall and the trampoline park over to the opposite side. This would create an opportunity of connecting the ice rink space and the trampoline park by creating a seamless transition on this side of the centre by

connecting these two spaces to incorporate a different offer which is what has been consulted upon.

- 4.8 The Trampoline Park has welcomed three times the number of sports hall users since its introduction. It has predominantly attracted families and young people. To build on this success, GLL have proposed that the new Trampoline Park offer is adapted to combine a new offer of installing an active zone, including high energy activities and challenges for people of all ages. This would include the already popular trampoline park, as well as an inflatable zone and ‘ninja warrior’ style section. Creating a new baby and toddler section within the active zone, as well as a junior section for slightly older children. Upgrading the squash courts, dojo and gym with better facilities. Moving the boxing area into a larger space, to accommodate increasing demand. Creating a new café area, with seating. The multi-sports hall would be reinstated. Activities such as badminton, basketball, netball, table tennis and 5-a-side football will continue to operate as they did previously.
- 4.9 The introduction of these new products would it was felt bring a new and exciting leisure activity to Sobell Leisure Centre and the wider Islington Community. Islington and our Leisure partners, GLL are committed to offering Islington residents an active and sustainable leisure provision and it was the Council’s and GLL’s view that the introduction of these products would achieve these ambitions. This is based on GLL’s extensive market knowledge of the leisure industry and current trends and offers. There is a clear target to get more people active and these products achieve this in a new way for all of the family away from the traditional route of sports and gym related programmes. They provide a fun and accessible family time in a highly active environment. Installing a new state-of-the-art active zone, including high energy and interactive activities full of challenges for people of all age groups will support the goal to get more people more active more often as well as maintaining the already popular elements such as the trampoline park and increased active play.
- 4.10. There were also a number of points made in support of retaining the ice rink. These are summarised in section **8 and 9** below.
- 4.11. A consultation process opened on 26th May and ran for six weeks until 7th July to invite views on these proposals. In addition to seeking views on the proposed designs and the intention to not reinstate the ice rink, the consultation sought people’s views on what they value about the Sobell currently, and what people would like to see introduced to the centre in addition to what is currently offered and what might encourage people to use the centre more.

5. Communication, Consultation and Engagement Methodology

5.1 The communications strategy for the Sobell Leisure Centre consultation was developed alongside colleagues in the leisure, engagement and communications teams. The aims were to identify the different stakeholders and groups to target, ensuring Islington's diverse communities were represented, and plan how best to communicate effectively with them using a wide range of Council communications channels as well as community and partner networks.

Communications channels included:

- Press release to local newspapers
- IC Bulletin – internal staff bulletin so that frontline staff could help disseminate messaging
- Schools bulletin
- Ongoing social media campaign
- Cllr Turan letter to local papers
- Posters displayed at key sites across the borough
- Leaflets distributed across the borough
- Electronic notice boards
- Octopus communities – posters at their community centre sites
- Age UK newsletter

5.2 While the consultation was live, we were able to adapt our communications according to what we were learning. For example, we found that we were not receiving completed forms from many children and teenagers, so started doing outreach to specific groups. We created a poster aimed at young people, targeted more schools, attended youth hub events, and attended the Eid in the park event in Highbury Fields (which was mostly families with children and teenagers). This increased the input from children and young people into the consultation.

5.3 We also used the Let's Talk Islington (LTI) engagement platform to host the Sobell Leisure Centre consultation. This is a newly adopted platform that will be used by the Council for all consultations going forward. It is a secure method of collecting responses that removes the risk of individual users submitting multiple entries and allows us to interrogate the data received in a detailed way. We only accepted responses through the LTI platform, or on paper versions of the survey, to ensure that all the data was captured

effectively, and an aspect of that was recording it in a centralised way. To mitigate any restrictions that not accepting email responses might create, we ensured there were multiple avenues available for people to engage with the consultation. A phone number was provided on the flyer to enable residents to request the flyer or survey in a different format or language, and the dedicated Sobell mailbox was available to answer questions or to request paper copies to be posted. As detailed below, the flyer was delivered to each household within a sizable radius, between 0.85km and 1.4km of the Sobell Leisure Centre and the paper survey was available in many different locations, as well as officers being available in person at numerous events.

- 5.4 The consultation opened on 26th May and ran for six weeks, closing on 7th July. During that time, we received 830 responses directly through the platform, and a further 173 paper copies were received and manually inputted by officers, giving a total of 1003 responses. In total 25,000 were letter dropped and 8,000 were distributed at different venues totalling 33,000 flyers. This represents a return of 3% on the number of flyers we distributed. While we do not have benchmarked return percentages, the Consultation Institute regard a 1% return to be normal, and above 1% to be good. The LTI page itself has been visited over 6000 times, which suggests a 18% engagement rate based on the number of flyers distributed.
- 5.5 Flyers detailing the consultation were delivered to 25,000 households in the surrounding area. This included the whole of Tollington, Finsbury Park and Arsenal Wards, and half of Tufnell Park and Holloway Wards. Posters, flyers and paper copies of the survey were available at all 10 libraries, the museum, and all 16 children's centres across the borough. Flyers and posters were also displayed at all other GLL leisure centres in Islington, and several community centres. Digital posters with a QR code were displayed on leisure centre and Housing noticeboards.
- 5.6 GLL contacted all their members by email with the consultation link as well as meeting with many of their regular groups such as Better Get Together, martial arts, squash, badminton and boxing. They were also available after swimming and gymnastics classes to talk to parents and meet with the Disability Sports Coach. GLL hosted six customer drop-in sessions to offer an opportunity for customers to talk with staff and the products team, along with several ad-hoc sessions in parks.
- 5.7 Officers undertook in-person visits, each lasting several hours, at eight of Islington's busiest libraries. Officers have attended several events/meetings to promote participation in the consultation, such as a Holloway Ward partnership event, attendance at Eid in the park and a stall at the Cally Festival. Two officers spoke briefly at the end of Monday prayers at The Muslim Welfare House and had a stall handing out flyers and surveys, and we also attended post-Friday prayers at the Finsbury Park Mosque. Two officers went to a meeting at Andover Community Centre to raise awareness.
- 5.8 A poster was created specifically aimed at young people, which was displayed in and around secondary schools. There was a session in one of the secondary schools held by

a Health Improvement Officer for Physical Activity, to encourage the children to complete the survey and a session with secondary PE leaders. An officer attended the Islington Youth Forum where the consultation flyer was circulated. Officers visited 14 primary schools in 13 different Wards to hand out flyers to parents and carers outside school gates at pick up time. Officers also attended an under 14's girls football tournament to engage with players, coaches and parents, and sessions at both Platform Youth Club and Lift Youth Centre. Access to Sports and Arsenal in the Community engaged with young people through their sessions. We also engaged with an Instagram influencer popular for reviewing London's best child play/entertainment options, who promoted the consultation on her Instagram account with over 35k followers.

- 5.9 Internally, the consultation link was circulated in newsletters and bulletins, including the Chief Executive's blog and on Microsoft Yammer, and was displayed on several electronic noticeboards. Paper copies of the flyer were also available in the Cottage Road office.

6. Consultation Outcomes

Background

- 6.1 Consultation on the Sobell Leisure Centre redevelopment began at the end of May 2023 and ran for six weeks, with the online survey open from 26th May to 7th July. We received 1003 responses, both online and via physical copies of the survey distributed across the borough, which are all included in the analysis in this report.
- 6.2 A full description of the consultation methodology is set out above in section 5 of this report.
- 6.3 A full description and breakdown of the data analysis process, survey respondents' profile and consultation outcomes, including with differences by demographic groups where statistically significant, can be found in Appendix 1. The executive summary of findings is set out in the following section.

Survey Findings Executive Summary

- 6.4 Most survey respondents (54%) reported not being impacted if the ice rink were to not be reinstated, while 36% reported that they would be impacted if the ice rink was not reinstated (10% of respondents reported being unsure or did not answer the question). This did not vary significantly between current and non-users of the centre. There were however some differences in response between demographic groups, most notably with more disabled respondents (48%) reporting an impact than non-disabled respondents (32%). This was generally due to concerns about accessibility.
- 6.5 For those who said they would be impacted, the most common impact described was that removing the ice rink would lead to a decline in the centre's sports offering, closely followed by concerns with accessibility, specifically that Lee Valley Ice Centre is too far

away with complex transport links to be a viable alternative. When presented with the Council's reasons for being minded not to reinstate the ice rink, many respondents provided options to reconcile these challenges. Whilst these reasons were varied, common themes were to use insurance money to build a better, more sustainable rink (for example by installing solar panels).

- 6.6 When commenting on the proposed new designs, many respondents raised concerns about the proposed Active Zone catering more heavily to younger audiences, while others praised a perceived focus on catering to children. Many others offered suggestions about expanding the sports provision. Similarly, when asked what might encourage more frequent use of the centre, most responses referenced wider variety of sports to take part in, with specific references to badminton and handball. Finally, when asked about ensuring the centre is an inclusive space for all in the future, respondents were most likely to support dedicated sessions for different groups – for example, women only sessions. There were some differences between groups in these priorities, with women most likely to support a creche and disabled respondents most likely to support staff inclusivity training.

7. Concerns expressed over prejudgment of the consultation

- 7.1. During the consultation period, internal emails of Islington Council officers were released following an FOI request. Following that release, it was suggested by supporters of the reinstatement of the ice rink, that the emails show that the Council has prejudged the outcome of the consultation and the future of an ice rink at Sobell, and that the consultation is not a genuine process.
- 7.2. The decision-maker will be a senior officeholder. He or she will take care to exercise independent judgment on this decision. While it is recognised that the Council has, for some time, been very minded to not retain an ice rink at Sobell, and that the likelihood of a different outcome now being reached is low, it is nonetheless important that the decision-maker keeps an open mind as to the possibility (even if very slim) that a different view may now be arrived at, and the decision-maker considers carefully all of the representations and views that have been received in favour of retention of an ice rink at Sobell.
- 7.3. The email exchanges that have been released conveyed robust views held at the time by the officers who authored those emails. They reflect the strong initial view held by the Council against reinstatement of an ice rink at Sobell. Following these email discussions, which took place before the consultation began, the Council decided to have a fuller consultation, which included the option of retaining the ice rink, so that it could better understand people's views before taking a final decision. While the Council has done this, it has still been the case that the very strong provisional view is against reinstatement of an ice rink, and the likelihood of a different outcome is low.

- 7.4. The Council has taken steps to ensure that specific officers who authored the emails in issue play no part in decision-making, and no further part in discussions concerning the future of Sobell.

8. Ice rink viability options

- 8.1. At the start of the process the Council considered two options for the Sobell, one with the ice rink to re-instate as was and the second without the ice rink and a new facility offer as laid out in the Executive report of the 18th May. The Council was minded not to reinstate the ice rink but set out to consult on the impacts of this and the alternative proposals and to consider that feedback ahead of making a final decision. As part of the consultation and engagement process, there was early feedback from the ice user stakeholders about the impact of the loss of the ice rink, questions about the information provided for the basis of the decision and suggestions and challenges raised regarding how the issues facing the ice could be overcome.
- 8.2. There were a number of issues that were raised by users of the ice rink wishing to see the Council reinstate the ice rink. A summary of the issues raised by ice rink stakeholders is listed below. These points represent their views on the matter.

- The significant cost of re-instatement of £1.8million (ex-VAT and fees) is not a relevant consideration as the insurance will fund and pay for that.
- That the usage figures used for the basis of the decision were inaccurate and do not take into account usage levels before lockdown.
- GLL has not maximised use of the rink, restricted the operating hours, not marketed it, and has effectively allowed it to go into decline and has been mismanaged. They cite Lambeth as an example where GLL are not now running the Streatham ice rink.
- The fees and charges had not been increased.
- There are other providers of ice rinks that are enabling them to run successfully.
- A new ice rink would have the benefit of new more efficient plant and equipment that would reduce the amount of energy used and could be further offset with renewable energy and heat network technology.
- The legacy of the donation made by Sir Michael Sobell 50 years ago was for a community sports centre that included an ice rink, and the Council is failing to uphold that legacy by closing the ice rink.
- That not reinstating the ice rink, in place of an active play area, is in contradiction to Islington's Active Together Strategy; an ice rink is a more suitable physical activity to a wider demographic compared to an active play area which is suited for a younger demographic.
- The user profile of the ice rink has a higher proportion of females and ethnic communities using the facilities and so its closure would have a disproportionate impact on those particular groups.

- The loss of the ice rink and replacement with an Activity Zone would constitute a change of use and require planning consent.
- There are already around 200 soft play facilities around London but only a handful of ice rinks.
- Lee Valley as an alternative venue for Sobell is inadequate mitigation because it is too far away and has poor transport links.
- The Council has ignored the community benefit of the rink, does not promote or advance equality of opportunity for groups who are already disadvantaged when it comes to access to sports and leisure facilities (not therefore complying with the PSED) and the Council has not made any proper (or any) efforts to consider alternative proposals to make the rink sustainable and integrate it into its chosen Scheme.

This section addresses these issues and sets out the work that has been done to explore alternative options to retain the ice rink. The equalities implications that are raised are addressed in the equality's implications section of the report.

- 8.3. It is worth noting here that it was always with deep regret that the Council reached the provisional view that it was minded to not reinstate the ice rink for the many reasons that have been explained elsewhere. Ice skating as a sport and activity does have many benefits. It provides a fun way to be active, requires the development of new skills and can be an accessible sport to some. It has the potential to provide a route into development and progression for young people learning. It offers different types of activity from lone figure skating, speedskating, show skating and ice hockey. It can create a lifelong love of the sport and create good habits of regular activity. Ice skating and ice sports can be accessible to people of different abilities and ages and allows people of different ages to participate in an activity together.
- 8.4 The Council has heard this reflected back in the feedback from the consultation. There is a strong core group of users of the ice rink who are passionate and committed to having an ice rink at the Sobell.
- 8.5 The Council is also mindful that ice has been part of the Sobell Sports and Leisure Centre from the outset, and that there are many residents with strong memories of learning to skate at the Sobell. It is a core part of the identity and legacy of the Sobell. This has made proposing its non-reinstatement a significant decision.
- 8.6 The decision-maker will no doubt take all of the matters into account in reaching the decision.

Usage

- 8.7. Users have questions regarding the usage numbers for the ice rink that operated at the Sobell. It had been estimated by GLL that there were on average 475 users per week across the groups comprising casual skate, learn to skate and hires. Some estimates were used for the bookings and following a meeting with ice users and stakeholders on

the 9th May the Council and GLL committed to conducting a review of the bookings and user numbers. GLL met with the clubs to ensure they had more accurate numbers for the bookings and that the clubs' numbers were better reflected in the usage numbers.

- 8.8 Set out below are annual totals where we have them for casual and learn to skate sessions. We are using a weekly average as our comparative figure as the booking numbers are averages. These figures are for the 12-month period prior to the flood in August 2022.

The breakdown of the figures are as follows:

Casual use:

Total annual – 8064

Weekly average over the year – 155

Learn to skate

Total annual attendance over the year – 2995

Weekly average – 57

(The Learn to skate programme was growing. It had an average of 217 pupils a month with a peak in June 2022 of 298 pupils. Three more lesson slots were also programmed for September, but they have not been included as there were no actual bookings yet and these figures are based on actual usage.)

Block bookings

Of the 8 clubs that have been block bookers of the Sobell, two have not booked in some time. UCL last booked in early 2019 and the Haringey Hounds last booked in March 2020, so have not been included.

That leaves six clubs and one regular group booking. These figures are the ones supplied by all of the groups. They are as follows:

- Step by Step – 50 (Charity based in Hackney which is a local special needs out-of-school Jewish charity. They provide transport for their users).
- Sobell Slappers – average users 12
- Private hire – average users: 12
- Yetis Hockey – average users: 20
- Private hirs – average users: 20
- Sobell Sabres - average users: 20
- Sobell Ice club – average users: 143

In terms of ad hoc bookings, they were very infrequent with schools and other groups and are included in the casual usage figures above. They are a mix of in and out of borough schools and community groups.

Table 1: Sobell Ice Usage Summary

Usage type	Weekly average
Learn to skate	57
Casual	155
Block bookings	134
Sobell Ice Club	143
Total	489

Total annual usage: 25,428

This compares with the following annual usage levels of other facilities:

Trampoline Park	96,851
Soft play	25,661
Sports Hall	20,420

- 8.9. One of the requests was also for what the usage figures were for the pre-lockdown period. GLL as an organisation moved to a new online booking and data system last year. This impacted on GLL's ability to extract data from the old system. So, although we know the total usage figures for the centre, it is not known what they were for individual activities within each centre. This is a national issue and not one that is limited to just Islington. Last year, the Sobell Leisure Centre had around 400,000 user visits. In 2019, before the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Sobell had around 500,000 user visits per year. The contract is still in a recovery period as the leisure market has changed, with more people working from home and a cost-of-living crisis that is impacting people's choices.
- 8.10 In terms of the current operating model for the ice rink at Sobell there was a full programme of bookings, learn to skate and public skate time for all the peak periods of midweek evenings and weekend. The ice was fully available for bookings but there had been no demand apart from occasional ad hoc bookings. Public day time skate they had

found to be no take up of so had ceased to offer that. The Ice was marketed to the community alongside all other Sobell activities and included in marketing materials. However, we do know that some elements of the ice program had not re-started such as the birthday party offer, Saturday night ice disco and there was not a development program in place.

Operating Loss

- 8.11. At the meeting of the Executive meeting on the 18th May further clarification was requested over the detail of the £0.250m operating loss.

The total expenditure exceeded the total income received for the ice rink. The main costs are energy, which has been volatile in the past year, and staffing costs. The amount of income received does not cover all of these costs.

During the 12 months before the flood, income for the rink increased by £0.049m due in part to the closure of the Lee Valley ice rink. The future projections following a re-opening of the Sobell ice rink have been estimated to reduce back to the lower levels in anticipation of movement back to Lee Valley with the opening of the new, Olympic-sized rinks there.

- 8.12. The Capital costs of re-instating the ice rink are significant at £1.800m. Although the capital costs of the reinstatement would be covered by the insurance, it is still a significant level of investment. The insurers have also agreed to the principle of re-instating an alternative offer and not like for like as long as the costs of doing so do not exceed the costs of reinstating like for like. The insurance only covers the capital and not the operational revenue costs. So, given the financial position of the ice rink, the flood provides the Council and GLL a unique window of opportunity to reconsider the facility mix within the Sobell, to assess whether there is a different offer that can increase usage levels, reach a diverse group, and address the very significant financial risks of operating an ice rink, without needing to find additional capital funds for that investment. If the Council was to proceed with the reinstatement of the ice rink and the financial losses then became unsustainable, there is a significant chance that it would find itself in a position in which it had to consider closure and then find the capital itself to convert the space to an alternative use. If the Active Zone is adopted the Council and GLL will seek to maximise the insurance capital to deliver broader improvements to the Centre offer.

Market Appraisal

- 8.13. Supporters of reinstatement of the ice rink have cited the example of Streatham ice rink in Lambeth having been removed from GLL's management. Having reviewed that, the situation is somewhat different. GLL's leisure contract with Lambeth had a natural expiry date of April 2023, having been in place for 16 years. This partnership also saw the Council extend the contract twice for an additional 6 years. With the contract expiry

coming up, the Council took a political decision that it wished to deliver leisure service directly, which reflected the direction of travel the Council had taken with other previously outsourced services, and therefore at the expiry of GLL's contract the service was not re-tendered. It was not a case of the ice rink being removed; the whole Leisure contract came to an end. GLL still manages a leisure centre in Lambeth, which operates alongside those delivered directly by the Council.

- 8.14 The financial cost of the ice rink with the rising energy prices is an important reason that the Council is recommending that Sobell does not reinstate the ice rink. If the ice rink is to be retained, then the Council would need a way of addressing those financial pressures. As part of the consultation, a number of questions were raised about the way that the ice rink was operated that resulted in the significant losses that the ice rink was facing. In summary, they were, that the ice programme was not adequate and was not meeting demand, that it was not marketed and promoted, and that any new facility would have better more efficient technology. Examples were provided of different providers that are successfully operating ice rinks in other locations.
- 8.15. There were two operators that were raised during the consultation, one that the ice users suggested: (1) One that operates a similar sized rink in Bracknell, and (2) Planet Ice that operates 14 ice rinks across the country. Both operators were contacted, and meetings set up. A visit to Planet Ice's facility in Hemel Hempstead was also undertaken and we met with them. The meetings and site visit were very helpful in understanding how two different operators that specialize in ice were operating similar facilities and making them work.

Key to this were two things. First, the right plant and equipment and strong housekeeping and energy management to ensure the facilities were operating at their most efficient and secondly an extensive broad programme of development skating, learn to skate and public skating sessions at the right price points. Both operators recognised that ice is a premium product and requires a premium price to make it viable.

The rink at Hemel Hempstead is drawing people from a broad area, including North London. The rink is similar in size to Sobell but, is larger having twice the capacity. The public skate sessions at Hemel have a capacity of 200, as compared to 100 at Sobell. It is 750m². Sobell in comparison is 496m². The location at Hemel Hempstead does not have the same competition and serves a wide area with a different demographic and is in an out-of-town warehouse as part of a leisure and shopping complex. There is a single rink operator at Bracknell. It is a larger rink at 1500m². Planet Ice shared the type of programme that they operate and how they look to maximise the uptake of the ice. They said that there is a seasonal nature to the business with the highest use in the autumn/winter and low casual skating in peak summer.

Planet Ice expressed an interest in operating the rink at Sobell on the basis it would pay no rent for its exclusive use.

Feasibility

- 8.16 The Exempt Appendix considers the legal, financial and commercial implications of seeking either an alternative specialist provider or a different model of operating the rink noting that the Council is in contract with GLL, a not-for-profit organisation until March 2029 and the Sobell Leisure Centre is leased to GLL until that same date.
- 8.17. It also has to be recognised that third party operators are commercial operators and would have to run the ice rink to make a profit. It has also been suggested by the operators that the Council would have to subsidise any proposal by offering the ice rink rent free with no contribution to the capital cost of reinstating it. GLL is a social, not for profit enterprise and a registered charity. The Council under the contract has control over prices as they must be approved by Council. Under any commercial arrangement the Council would lose that control. There would also be practical issues that may make it difficult for such an arrangement to be viable including potential differences in operating hours between the rink and the centre, catering and birthday rooms that would be operated by GLL and London Living wage that may all impact on the business plan. It is not possible at this stage to know if once a formal competitive process was gone through, whether the current offer would still stand once a more detailed business assessment had been conducted.

Energy Use

- 8.18 One of the other key considerations was energy. There were a number of suggestions raised to address this issue. The main one is the question of using a more efficient plant. There were also suggestions around increased renewable energy, the use of heat networks, and the idea of having a seasonal rink that converts to roller skating during the summer.
- 8.19. From discussing the issue with other operators and GLL's Lee Valley team it could be expected that new plant for the chiller unit, that is the main high energy element, would be about 40-50% more efficient than the current plant. Energy price rises are also fortunately slowing. However, they do remain high. The insurance capital means that we can specify the most up to date and efficient plant. This was one of the key mitigations put forward from the consultation. This is then used in the remodelling exercise to ensure we have captured the energy and cost saving impact of the new chillers. There are of course though other energy uses in the facility such as air conditioning, lighting and other uses, that would still be similar.

- 8.20 It is therefore possible to re-forecast the expenditure on utilities on a new rink which has been set out in detail in the Exempt Appendix, however this would save 208,000 kWh of electricity per year saving £0.077m, based on current energy prices. The potential for using the excess heat generated by the plant to freeze the ice has also been looked into. The idea is that the heat can be recovered and used as an alternative form of heating for the centre and other buildings such as the nearby Housing.
- 8.21 The level of heat generated is not sufficient to export into a heat network to heat say the Harivist estate opposite, which would need major investment to enable this to happen, so would not be cost effective. It could, however, help to offset the wider heating costs of the Leisure centre. We have only been able to establish that it is potentially theoretically possible. To determine the viability of reusing the heat would require a separate M&E survey and evaluation to be carried out in order to establish exactly how much heat is usable, the design of the building, getting the heat all the way through the building using old plant, which may not be compatible and need replacing, and how much heat would remain. It was not felt to be a significant factor in comparison to the improved efficiency of the plant.
- 8.22 Increasing the amount of renewables has been suggested. The Sobell already has on the roof the largest solar panel array in the borough. There is limited scope to increase this. The solar panels generate around 114,000 kWh per year.
- 8.23 The final option is to switch to a seasonal offer, and when the energy demand is highest and usage demand lowest, in the summer to switch to an alternative use such as roller skating. This may reduce energy consumption. However, it would also mean that the ice-skating programmes would have to stop for that period. We found one example of this. This is the Murrayfield rink in Glasgow, which has been forced to do this to stay financially viable. That facility has only just been introduced. As a result, we have been unable to get any details from them as to how it is working and what savings will be generated. Advice from both of the ice specialists was very much against this as an option. Their view was that if an ice rink is to be operated, it should be operated fully, year round; and that ensuring viability and sustainability of the user base requires an all year round offer, to retain key customers.

Option for GLL to Operate Ice with smaller Active Zone

- 8.24 It is clear though that it could be possible to operate a different model for running the ice rink with an extended programme, a broader range of ice products and a different price

point that better reflects the operating costs. Combined with the more efficient plant and equipment, then it should be possible to close the operating cost gap that it was operating at.

If the Council is unable to bring in a different provider then there is still the option of requiring GLL to operate that new model. We shared our findings with GLL and asked them to set out a new business plan to incorporate a new ice rink, alongside a smaller Active Zone to see what that could look like with a full year of the energy costs at the higher level and how that compares with the business plan for the new proposed Active Zone.

- 8.25. As part of the consultation process, we developed further learning from the other ice providers. They suggested that the ice rink could be viable, and one expressed an interest in operating it. However, this would require GLL relinquishing the lease and having a private operator manage the rink. This break-even position was under the premise that there would be a peppercorn rent, the validity of this is detailed further in this report. GLL were requested to provide an updated Business plan for Ice with new kit, new pricing and new programming akin to the various models that we had gathered information on as well as any learning from their new model at Lee Valley which opened in June.
- 8.26 GLL provided three versions of a plan. One included current pricing. The second had increased pricing akin to that of the marketplace. The third allowed for the inclusion of Patch Ice which is a development programme for figure skaters to develop their skill, that had not been included in the offer previously. The full detail of these proposals are set out in the Exempt Appendix due to their commercial sensitivity.
- 8.27 The proposed business plan represents a significant improvement, particularly against what was potentially forecast with a full year of high energy prices. However, this falls significantly short of being cost neutral. Even if we were to allow for a 12-month review post operating, this still results in significant financial risk. With a proposed Ice Rink business plan also comes a revised smaller Active Zone and reduced viability of this as the space remains as existing and therefore reduces the available growth space. This would also reduce the projected growth in usage figures. The new ice rink may increase usage (although GLL think best case would be to retain numbers as now), but this would be dwarfed by the loss in usage uptake from a reduced Active Zone. The projected usage levels for a retained ice rink and smaller active zone would be 150,000. This is based on maintaining user numbers for the ice as GLL do not believe that significant growth is realistic with the market conditions but accept that the new product would provide a lift to hopefully at least maintain numbers.
- 8.28 To better evaluate the business plans that have been put forward and to understand the credibility of the offer from the commercial operator, the Council commissioned Max

Associates, which is a leading firm of leisure consultants, to provide an independent expert evaluation. This is provided as an Exempt Appendix.

- 8.29 Factoring in the reduced energy costs and the increased pricing strategies, the reinstatement of the ice rink will still result in the overall leisure contract resulting in a loss. Whilst this loss is not as large as it had previously been, the Council would not receive any financial benefit if this option were chosen. If a new pricing strategy is used similar to privately ran ice rinks, this could potentially double the price of some of the visits and therefore effect visitor numbers.

Change of Use

- 8.30. Planning has advised that planning permission is highly unlikely to be required. The Sobell is a Sports and Leisure Centre and not a stand-alone ice rink. A sports and leisure centre use was previously entirely under Use Class D2. Following updates to the Use Class Regulations, a sports and leisure centre is now Class E with a standalone Ice Rink being F.2. However, given that the ice rink was always encompassed within the Leisure Centre use, its small footprint and that the dominant use of the site can clearly be demonstrated to be sports and leisure, the rink is therefore ancillary. As it is ancillary, then its removal and replacement with an Activity Zone would be unlikely to constitute a change of use that would require planning permission. It would simply be internal works that maintain the predominant use as a sports and leisure centre. If it was needed, then this would have to be determined definitively by applying for a certificate of lawfulness. This would need to be factored into the timetable for implementing works once a decision has been made about how to proceed.
- 8.31 It has been stated that there is not a need for a soft play in that there are already lots of soft play offers available. However, soft play only forms part of the offer, building on a facility that was already provided at the Sobell, although much smaller than proposed. The overall offer of the Active Zone would cater for toddlers, juniors, teenagers and adults. It creates an indoor activity space of a significant size and capacity to get large numbers of people active in an enjoyable whilst still challenging way. It aims to create a social, family focussed hub for the centre: something that is highlighted as a high priority from feedback from the consultation.
- 8.32. The Sobell Leisure Centre was built in 1973 and is 50 years old. It was built following a donation by Sir Michael Sobell to establish a sports centre, including the ice rink, for the common good, social-purpose and wellbeing of the Islington community. It has been claimed that the closure of the ice rink and replacement with an activity zone is not in keeping with that original spirit and intended purpose of the ice rink. The Sobell Foundation have written to us to express their view that they would like to see the ice rink retained. The Council recognises the tremendous legacy of Sir Michael Sobell in

enabling the establishment of the Sobell Sports and Leisure Centre. A lot though has changed in 50 years, both in the sports and leisure industry and the financial position of local authorities. The Council is determined to protect that legacy and ensure that the centre provides a wide range of activities and services to support all Islington's residents to be active. That means providing different ways for people to be active outside of traditional sports but also ensuring a sustainable financial future for the centre to ensure it is supporting the health and wellbeing of Islington's communities for the next 50 years as well.

Mitigation for Existing Users

- 8.33 The Lee Valley Ice Centre re-opened on the 17th of June with two Olympic sized rinks and it is also operated by GLL. Efforts have been made to secure ice time at Lee Valley for the groups that use the Sobell. Irrespective of the decision on the future of ice there was a commitment to try to secure the groups ice time for the short or long term. An agreement was secured that the current hire price of Sobell would be honoured for a year. This was on the basis of them taking up a third or half of one of the two ice pads at Lee Valley. There was also an offer to be able to hire one full ice pad at £235.00 per hour.
- 8.34 The equivalent size of Sobell was a third of one of the Lee Valley ice pads but they were also offered a half pad for the same price. The division of the ice requires set up and take down time so this was offered to the groups on a Wednesday evening. Some safety concerns about the method of division of the ice were raised, however GLL have assured them that the divider is a continuation of the boards surrounding the ice rink but at a lower level. When the boards are in place ice hockey can only be mixed with ice hockey, not any other activities due to the risk assessment of this provision. GLL have confirmed that they have ice time available for hire but with some flexibility around time to ensure a viable programme. The current situation with the clubs and bookers is as follows of the 8, six now have ice time at Lee Valley, as follows:

- 1 private group have relocated to the Lee Valley
- The Lee Valley hockey club has fully relocated
- The Yetis and the Sobell Sabres have combined and taken a full pad hire.
- Step by Step have relocated to Lee Valley.

The Sobell Slappers have declined any ice time. They have been followed up by GLL but they have stated that they do not wish to use Lee Valley.

- 8.35 The one group that we have not resolved yet is the Sobell Ice Club. There is ice availability for them but there is a need for the group to meet with GLL Lee Valley to discuss the nature of their hire. The operating model of the Sobell ice club comprises their own lessons and courses and development programme, which Lee Valley provide separately. There therefore needs to be a more detailed conversation and we will make further efforts to facilitate and ensure the Sobell Ice club can still secure suitable ice time at the Lee Valley.

The UCL and Imperial groups didn't actually have bookings at the Sobell and so they have been offered new hires at Lee Valley and we await an update.

The Learn to skate programme has been absorbed into the Lee Valley one.

9 Key Considerations for Decision

9.1 The options that will be considered are:

- [1] Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.
- [2] Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre including reinstatement of the ice rink. This option would include improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre, either within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL, or with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

There are a number of considerations regarding the future of the Sobell. The factors for assessment are set out below and considered between the options summarised above:

- The financial sustainability of the operating model for the Council.
- The affordability of accessing sport and leisure activity for residents.
- The numbers and types of users that each option enables to be active
- The environmental implications
- The outcome of the consultation and the feedback provided by the community on the proposals.
- The equalities implications of any decision and what can be achieved in the mitigation of those

9.2 The financial sustainability of the operating model for the Council

The financial operating loss of the ice rink was part of the reason for recommending that the Council does not reinstate the ice rink. The £0.250m projected operating loss previously reported could be reduced as set out below as well as an assessment of associated risks.

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

If the facilities at Sobell Centre are renewed without the ice rink and with the increased activity zone, then the alternative proposals yield a significant increase on users of 250,000, in comparison to retention of the ice rink, as set out above.

The details of the financial projections of the new proposals are commercially sensitive and the details of this are contained in the Exempt Appendix. The proposals would operate at a surplus.

GLL pay an annual rent to the Council. During lockdown, the Council deferred rental payments to support GLL through that period. GLL only pays this back to the Council when the contract can move to a surplus position.

It is anticipated that the alternative proposals are likely to improve the business plan by reducing expenditure and significantly increasing usage and therefore income.

The new proposals would with the projections see a significant portion of rent re-paid to the Council before the end of the current contract.

Option 2 - A) Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre including reinstatement of the ice rink. This option would include improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre, either within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL, or B) with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

Option 2A - If the ice rink is reinstated with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL, then this would see an improved business position for GLL but would not move the contract into a surplus position and there would be trading risks with the ice rink given the increased competition from Lee Valley.

In order to evaluate what the financial position would be if GLL opted to not surrender the lease and continued to operate a re-instated ice rink directly a remodelling of the business plan has been undertaken and is detailed in the Exempt Appendix based on the information about efficiencies from new plant, new programmes and increased pricing.

This gives a bottom-line position based on a full year of the energy costs of £0.150m operating loss. This option would have no financial benefit to the Council.

Option 2B – Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

One of the operators has stated it would operate the rink with a peppercorn lease and both providers consulted with have engaged positively with the Council and provided advice on their operating programs and efficient plant.

If a surrender of the lease could be secured that enabled the Council to undertake a procurement exercise to provide an ice rink at the Sobell by private commercial

operators, for the purposes of this option appraisal and information provided it is considered that the operating loss could be reduced to somewhere between £0.150m to a break-even position. This option would not have any financial benefit for the Council.

It is important to note that there are risks associated with these assumptions.

The existing contract and lease arrangements with GLL mean that this is not possible without agreement from the current leaseholder GLL. If the Council decided to reinstate the ice rink, then it would need to enter into negotiations with GLL about the options to surrender part of the existing lease.

Should GLL opt to surrender the lease then a competitive procurement process would need to follow to ensure best value was obtained and the Council would bear the associated risks until tendering parties provide a formal offer and complete a legal agreement

9.3 **The affordability of accessing sport and leisure activity for residents.**

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

Ensuring a public leisure offer is accessible and affordable and financially viable and sustainable is a difficult balance. This is about having the right headline price for peak periods to generate the required levels of income, supported by concession pricing for those on lower incomes but also a programme of outreach and engagement sessions targeted at specific groups who would find even concession pricing prohibitive.

Indicative pricing models for the new provision are included in the exempt appendix and are based around the pricing model that existed for the Extreme Trampoline Park which would be the starting point. These would need to be developed and negotiated once the Council has made its decision but would be underpinned by the above principles.

The reduced energy consumption, plant and operating costs would enable a lower headline price point for residents.

Option 2A - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL.

One of the themes that came back from the consultation was that the Sobell was an affordable ice rink and therefore accessible. If ice was to be retained there would have to be a significant uplift in price point for casual skate, hires and lessons.

Ensuring a public leisure offer is accessible and affordable and financially viable and sustainable is a difficult balance. This is about having the right headline price for peak periods to generate the required levels of income, supported by concession pricing for those on lower incomes but also a programme of outreach and engagement sessions targeted at specific groups who would find even concession pricing prohibitive.

The price point for ice previously was £5.00 for members and £7.35 non-members for adults, £4.65 junior member and £5.85 junior non-member with a £1.50 skate hire fee.

The additional costs and expenditure of operating an ice rink would require a higher headline price point than the alternative proposals.

Option 2B - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

The remodelling in the exempt appendix is based on the price points used by the private ice operators that engaged with the Council and their advice.

This would realise an increased cost to residents of a new flat rate of £12.70 per visit and skate hire of £2.80. The pricing model does not allow for a junior price or concession prices. This is more expensive than the two closest rinks.

Site	Standard	Concession
Planet Ice	£12.70	N/A
Sobell Ice Rink	£12.70	N/A
Lee Valley Ice Rink	£10	£8
Alexandra Palace Ice Rink	£9.50-£11.00	£8-£9

In addition, if the Council was to offer a sub-lease to a commercial operator it would not have direct control over the pricing for residents beyond any mechanisms that could be secured through tender specification and lease terms.

9.4 The numbers and types of users that each option enables to be active

The Islington Active Together Strategy sets out the vision of getting the least active, more active more often. So, developing facilities that enable that increased activity in currently inactive members of the community is a priority for the Council.

The annual usage numbers for the different facilities in the 12 months prior to the flood were:

Total annual usage:

Ice rink	25,428
Trampoline Park	96,851
Soft play	25,661
Sports Hall	20,420

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

The capacity levels in the existing trampoline park were up to 120 per hour whereas the new proposed area has the potential for 150-300 visits per hour and projections are based on overall usage being around 250,000 user visits.

The new proposals would therefore bring in 110,000 new user visits a year (an extra 2000 per week). These projections are at the lower end of the estimated numbers of users and considered prudent.

Increased footfall, particularly by families and young people, including women and girls, will also lead to uptake and growth in other programmes such as martial arts, boxing, basketball, gymnastics amongst others. A number of the clubs that currently use the Sobell as part of the engagement process referenced the growth in numbers following the trampoline park and welcomed the new proposals specifically because of the increased numbers that would be brought to the Sobell.

The number of people being would be significantly increased under this proposal in comparison to the other options.

General consideration of different usage.

It is recognised though that usage of the Active Zone is on a pay and play basis and may not mean regular activity for users. The ice-skating programme with learn to skate and the development programme provides a framework for sustained regular usage and activity for participants. There will still be a level of occasional use for the public skate programme though. The Active programme will be designed to encourage regular use through tournaments and team activities and regular youth nights with discounted admission. There will also be strong internal marketing to users of the many and varied sports programmes and clubs on offer at the Sobell and other venues in Islington to

encourage users of the facility to take up other regular sports programmes. This will be monitored through user surveys of the different clubs.

Option 2A - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL.

The alternative model of retaining the ice and introducing a smaller active zone would reduce the user numbers to 150,000, a reduction of 100,000. As stated above this is based on GLL's view that they would only be able to maintain ice user numbers at the 25,000-level due to market conditions and the limitations of the offer.

Option 2B - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

If the ice rink was reinstated and operated to a different model, based on the usage levels of other rinks there is the potential of increasing user numbers with a specialist operator focussed on marketing just ice. The other rinks were generating three to four times the number of users but with larger base capacities than Sobell. Even if those levels of usage could be achieved that would still therefore be 50,000 to 60,000 less users per year even with the best estimates for a new ice facility and the lower usage estimates for the new offer.

9.5 The environmental implications

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

Not re-instating the ice rink would have the most impact on reducing the environmental impact of the centre. The new facility would still have an energy demand in terms of lighting, ventilation, heating but would not be significantly more than it was for the previous Extreme Trampoline Park space.

Option 2A - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL.

The energy consumption and environmental impact is going to be higher for this option. The review that has been done has shown that this can be reduced and mitigated with

the use of more energy efficient plant and equipment with an identified reduction of 208,000 kWh's and reduction in the carbon footprint of 4.5 tonnes. There would be potential options to reduce this further through heat capture.

Option 2B - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

The energy consumption and environmental impact is going to be higher for this option. The review that has been done has shown that this can be reduced and mitigated with the use of more energy efficient plant and equipment with an identified reduction of 208,000 kWh's and reduction in the carbon footprint of 4.5 tonnes. There would be potential options to reduce this further through heat capture.

See also below Environmental Implications.

9.6 **The outcome of the consultation and the feedback provided by the community on the proposals.**

The consultation and engagement process yielded a high level of response and engagement within the 6-week timeframe that it took place in.

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

Most survey respondents (54%) reported not being impacted if the ice rink were to not be reinstated. 36% said they would be impacted and 9% of respondents reported being unsure with 1% no response.

Indoor facilities and a wide range of sports to participate in were two of the main takeaways along with the need for more dedicated sessions for specific groups including the need to ensure that activities are inclusive and accessible. There was concern that this would lead to a loss of sport within Islington and a common theme related to how both the ice rink and the current proposal serve different protected groups with overwhelming majority focussed on age.

Although with this option there is a clear loss of one sports offer in terms ice, the proposals do create space and opportunity for the programmes for other sports to be expanded and new ones introduced. The Dojo and boxing areas would be moved into larger, better equipped spaces. The old dojo space can also then be re-purposed to

create space for new sports, ideas for which are set out below but would be subject to more detailed engagement.

Option 2A - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL.

Within the overall response of the 36% who would be impacted there was clear demonstration of support for the ice rink retention and that those that currently use it care passionately about it and the benefits that it brings to them.

Options for mitigation and retention of the ice rink at Sobell were suggested, with the two main responses being the use of more efficient plant and the greater use of renewable energy. These have been tested throughout the development and consideration of options with assumptions developed around energy efficiency and operating models set out above.

Some respondents were concerned that the loss of the rink would result in a decline in the sporting offer and that the proposed mitigation of the Lee Valley is too far away and too complex to travel to.

Although the loss of the ice rink would mean the loss of a specific sporting activity from the Sobell, the reinstatement does provide an excellent opportunity to introduce new sports offers and in particular, new inclusive and accessible sports and this is set out in the equalities implications below and the Equality Impact Assessment. So new sports and new dedicated sessions of existing activities to enable different users to access and engage in those activities.

It is acknowledged that the Lee Valley Ice Centre is further away and would be a barrier for some groups and this is addressed in the equalities implications around options to travel to Lee Valley from Islington by bus or by train and other options for still providing access to Lee Valley for skating for particular groups by working in partnership with youth providers and disability groups in the borough.

Option 2B - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

This was identified as a potential solution in the responses to the consultation to transfer management of the rink to a commercial ice provider with more experience in managing rinks. This has been evaluated and there are legal and procurement challenges around

its implementation. There are risks with the viability and feasibility of this option and concerns about the accessibility and pricing model for commercial, private operator.

9.7 **The equalities implications of any decision and what can be achieved in the mitigation of those**

The equalities implications and mitigations are considered fully in Appendix 2 the Equality Impact Assessment but below sets out a summary in relation to the different options.

Option 1 - Procuring the rebuild of facilities at Sobell Centre without reinstating the ice rink, and with an increased Activity Zone.

One of the key considerations in usage is the different usage by different demographic groups of the different facilities. It is recognised that currently the demographic make up of the learn to skate programme is 70% female and 30% male, there isn't demographic information for the public skate and bookings. If that is translated through to all ice skate visits, then 25,000 users a year that would equate to 17,500 female visits and 7,500 males.

The Active Zone is considered to appeal to both male and female users equally. If the new facilities proposed under option 1 attract 250,000 users as is forecast, on a 50:50 basis that would be 125,000 female users and 125,000 male users.

The Active Zone does though also have significant positive benefits for protected characteristic groups. It would be designed to be inclusive and accommodating to a broad range of abilities, including individuals with special needs or requirements. Designs would include many features that promote accessibility, such as ramps with rest points and support rails, easy access corridors, alternative 'easy routes' and wheelchair accessible equipment.

The Active zone would incorporate sensory elements to cater to users with sensory sensitivities or sensory processing disorders.

These may include segregated areas with subdued lighting, quieter spaces for relaxation, and sensory activities like tactile walls or interactive panels that engage different senses. Specific sessions and facility time for specific disabled groups will be built into the programme. There will be specific engagement with neurodivergent groups, in particular those with autism to ensure the design is accessible and inclusive for them and to again ensure that there are specific autistic sessions. Staff training will be provided to ensure staff are aware of and can support the needs of different users.

The Active Zone would have significant benefits for young people and families and would also enable significantly more numbers of users to be active. The impact of this then on numbers of users from protected groups is illustrated by the comparative number of

females that would use the facility in comparison to ice even with a higher proportion of users.

In terms of supporting the Council's priority of getting inactive residents more active more often as set out in the Active Together Strategy this is most strongly supported by Option 1.

Option 2A - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre within the existing lease agreement between the Council and GLL.

Reinstating the ice would protect the offer for those that currently use it. This provides a facility that has a high appeal and use by female in proportion to male and is inclusive and accessible for disabled people. The overall usage numbers for this option are reduced as set out in 9.4 above.

It is also likely that the new price point model will have an impact on usage numbers and impact the accessibility of the facility for those on low incomes. GLL's revised business model is on the basis of maintaining user numbers despite that price point and increased competition from other rinks but that is a risk.

Option 2B - Reinstating the ice rink with improved efficiency and with the inclusion of a smaller active zone at Sobell Centre with the inclusion of a sub-lease of the ice rink to a specialist operator.

As above this protects the offer for those that currently use it. It has been suggested that a specialist provider with specific marketing and promotion and specialist knowledge could increase usage numbers. If the usage numbers for the ice rink could be doubled even, that would with a 70:30 split through an improved offering there would still be 35,000 female users, 90,000 less in total than with option 1.

10. Inclusive and accessible sports and leisure opportunities regardless of option appraisal outcome

- 10.1 There is already a number of activities and programmes being delivered at the Sobell that support it being an inclusive and accessible centre. These are detailed in the Equality Impact Assessment.
- 10.2 There are already programmes targeting older people at the Sobell. This includes the Better Get Together social sessions run in partnership with Age UK Islington and Walking

Football delivered with Arsenal in the Community at the Sobell. The Sobell has a disability sports coach based at the centre to develop activities and support disabled users at the centre. There are also offers at other centres including the Elfrida Society for people with learning disabilities that have regular sessions at the Islington Tennis Centre, Metro Blind Sport that offers blind and visually impaired tennis sessions at the Tennis Centre and WeSwim that provides swimming sessions and lessons for people with disabilities at Ironmonger Row Baths. There are also specific current offers for women and girls such as IFDP (women's beginner football) at Sobell and other park venues and Access to Sports women's football at Sobell. There is also a regular Platform Girls Club, delivered with the Schools Sports and Physical Activity team to provide taster sessions for teenage girls.

- 10.3 However there is much more that can be done, and the consultation has provided clear feedback on the need to introduce more inclusive and accessible sports to the Sobell and to have more targeted sessions for particular groups.
- 10.4 It is our aspiration for the Sobell Leisure centre to build on the already amazing diverse range of users to be a flagship for inclusion in sport and physical activity. As part of the next phase, we will continue to engage and work with partner organisations to ensure that user representatives from our target communities are involved in the co-design of a new programme of inclusive and accessible sport.

Below are some of the emerging actions that will be taken forward.

- 10.5 A detailed programme and plan will be developed using all of the feedback from the consultation but the wide-ranging engagement has identified important opportunities for the Council to develop a more inclusive and accessible offer for residents as part of the reinstatement plan for the whole of the Sobell Centre, not just the Active Zone. A summary of these is set out below:

- A programme of targeted design sessions with local community groups that represent local minority ethnic communities – such as Muslim Welfare House – young women and girls, low-income residents and LGBTQ+ communities to improve access to and engagement with the facilities.
- Targeted studio classes and activities for female only users to increase participation, with a particular focus on filling the gap between high impact sessions for younger ages and those aimed at older 60+ people
- Develop women's squash and badminton leagues.
- Increase the range of sports on offer, suggestions have included handball, fustball, padel tennis, pickle tennis, Archery and netball, indoor cricket and hockey.
- Development of social sessions badminton and squash for LGBTQ+ community.

- Work with existing partners to extend offers to Sobell for example Ishigaki Ju-Jitsu.
- Develop more inclusive sports offers such as Boccacia, Goalball, wheelchair rugby/basketball.
- Targeted youth engagement activities with local youth clubs including looking to restore the Saturday night project.
- Creating partnership with Bright Start and Bright Lives to deliver activities for their user families at the Sobell.
- Expand the 60+ programme to incorporate new sports such as Pickleball and Archery.
- Expand the after-school club programme working with the School Sports and Physical Activity Team.
- Targeted sessions for the gym for young people and women.
- Develop programme of multi-generational activities that enable the whole family to be active and participate together.
- Better use of the external space to create new space for multi-sports pitches, padel tennis etc.
- More work with the disability sports coach employed by GLL to explore opportunities to increase participation among disabled communities

10.6 Other elements that can be developed include:

- Strong marketing and promotion of wider sports and activities to casual pay and play bookers to support the transition from casual usage of pay and play facilities such as the Active Zone into engagement with sports clubs and programmes.
- Specific focus on creating more space for women and girls in a broader range of sports to improve participation. This will include the introduction of more gender-neutral sports that have a stronger appeal to women and targeted female only sessions to create, safe, social spaces, this would be jointly designed through further work with communities
- Training for staff around disabilities and LGBTQ+ cultural awareness to ensure a welcoming and inclusive centre for all the community. This could include specific training around neurodivergence, hearing impairment, learning difficulties, dementia awareness and others as well as trans awareness

11. Implications

11.1 Financial Implications

GLL has a contract with the Council to operate its leisure centres which runs until 31 March 2029. The Council receives an annual rental income from GLL.

Over the course of the 15-year contract GLL's business plan assumed certain levels of income and expenditure that delivered a profit margin. To support GLL over the Covid period the Council agreed to defer rental payments which will be paid back from future profits.

GLL have been running the leisure contract at a loss. In order for the Council to be repaid the deferred rental payments, the contract needs to have a profitable financial position.

The contract has also been impacted by the on-going energy crisis which the Council is sharing the risk of energy price increases with GLL on a 50/50 basis. A reduction in energy consumption would reduce the overall energy cost which would subsequently reduce the energy price risk share for both the Council and GLL.

The proposals discussed in this report have implications for both the levels of income and expenditure (including on energy costs) at the Sobell centre. All options will have a positive impact to the financial position at Sobell. Any increase in profitability improves the likelihood of repayment of the deferred rent.

The three options are:

- Option 1: Convert the Ice Rink to a new Active Zone with catering facilities
- Option 2A: Reinstate the Ice Rink within the GLL contract
- Option 2B: Reinstate the Ice Rink with a new provider

The only option that benefits the Council financially is Option 1: to replace the ice rink with a new Active Zone. These changes will allow the Council to receive the majority of the total deferred rental income. The other options improve the financial position of the leisure centre however they still leave the contract in a deficit.

The assumptions used by GLL to produce the calculations for Option 2A: Reinstate the Ice Rink within the GLL contract are ambitious and carry financial risk if not achieved. The external review of these figures concurs with this view.

It is likely that if a private provider is used to deliver the ice rink, such as in Option 2B: Reinstate the Ice Rink with a new provider, they will not pay the London Living Wage. If this was contractually obliged, this would increase the costs significantly.

There are other factors such as the reduction in energy prices and improvements to other leisure facilities that could improve the financial position of the leisure contract and therefore increase the probability of the Council receiving the full amount of deferred rent.

The insurance is currently covering the loss of rental income due on Sobell and GLL's loss of business income. The insurance cover is time limited to a decision to commence on one of the options of reinstatement by the end of July.

There are also inflationary pressures on costs which could impact on the cost of the works which may not be recoverable from insurance if the decision is delayed.

11.2 Legal Implications

- 11.2.1 The Council has a statutory power but not a duty to provide leisure centres. That power, which is set out in section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Powers) Act 1976, enables the Council to 'provide, inside or outside its area, such recreational facilities as it thinks fit and, without prejudice to the generality of the powers conferred by the preceding provisions of this subsection, those powers include in particular powers to provide ... (a) indoor facilities consisting of sports centres, swimming pools, skating rinks, tennis, squash and badminton courts, bowling centres, dance studios and riding schools;'

11.3 Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030

- 11.3.1 The ice rink was a high consumer of energy running on 593,216 kWh load per year and therefore a carbon footprint of 113 tonnes being emitted per annum. The new plant and equipment for chilling the ice is about 40% more efficient. The exempt appendix contains fuller details as part of the business plan for the consumption of the whole facility which includes not just the chillers but also the Air Handling Unit, Air Conditioning and other elements. This has been done to give a full comparison for the purpose of the business plan of the full costs of operating the ice, not just the chillers and air handling which the previous figure was based on. This reduces the consumption level for the facility overall by 208,000 kWh.

There is in addition the opportunity to recover the heat from cooling plant to offset some of the heating costs for the rest of the centre. This does not eliminate the environmental impact of the facility but does reduce it significantly. The carbon footprint of the forecast consumption level for the elements that relate to the operation of the ice arena specifically is 8.5 tonnes down from 13 tonnes.

This is much lower, and in comparison to other carbon sources is less significant when compared against the benefits of activity, so the environmental impacts of the facility are a more marginal factor now in making the decision. The Sobell has a large solar

array on the roof which helps to offset the carbon impact of the centre. Opportunities to increase the renewable element of the required electricity load are limited. Increased journeys of ice users to alternative facilities have not been assessed but would further reduce the margin of difference.

11.4 Equalities Impact Assessment

- 11.4.1 The Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The Council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The Council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

An Equalities Impact Assessment was completed on 17th July 2023. That assessment as set out in appendix 2 should be read in full.

12. Conclusion and reasons for the decision

- 12.1 The consultation and engagement outcomes reveal the complexity of the decision to determine the future use of the Sobell Leisure Centre following the severe damage done by the flood in August 2022. Most survey respondents (54%) reported not being impacted if the ice rink were to not be reinstated. 36% said they would be impacted and 9% of respondents reported being unsure with 1% no response.
- 12.2 Alongside the consultation outcomes regard must also be had to the many other material considerations described in this Report and its Appendices. There must be a balance of all these competing factors in reaching a lawful and reasonable decision. These include:
- The financial sustainability of any operating model for the Council.
 - The affordability of accessing sport and leisure activity for residents.
 - The numbers and types of users that each option enables to be active
 - The environmental implications
 - The outcome of the consultation and the feedback provided by the community on the proposals.
 - The equalities implications of any decision and what can be achieved in the mitigation of those

- 12.3 The options have been assessed including consideration of a more energy efficient ice rink. There is clear evidence that inclusion of an ice rink would impact negatively on the long-term financial sustainability of sport and leisure at the Sobell Centre.
- 12.4 There is clear evidence that the inclusion of a larger activity zone would enable a significant increase in the number of residents accessing the centre with a more affordable price point.
- 12.5 The continued inclusion of an ice rink would have a greater energy requirement, albeit more efficient plant and reuse of excess heat would limit the environmental impacts significantly.
- 12.6 The majority of survey respondents (54%) reported not being impacted if the ice rink were to not be reinstated, however did highlight the need for a broad range of sport and leisure activities to be provided.
- 12.7 The consultation responses and EQIA assessment has highlighted the need for additional program design to be undertaken to ensure that the broad range of sport and leisure activities provided are inclusive and accessible.
- 12.8 The renewal of facilities without the reinstatement of the Ice Rink will enable significantly more residents to participate more affordably in a range of sport and leisure activities that more closely aligns with the Councils Islington Active Together Strategy,
- 12.9 There are a number of regular users of the ice rinks and active clubs with members across London that will be affected by this decision therefore the proposed mitigation measures to support their activities at the nearby Lea Valley centre should be adopted.

13. Record of the decision

- 13.1 I have today decided to take the decision set out in section 2 of this report for the reasons set out above.

Authorised by:

Date:

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Consultation and Engagement Report

Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment

Appendix 3 – Exempt Financial and Commercial considerations

Appendix 4 – Exempt Independent Review

Background papers: None

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