

London Borough of Newham:

**Balaam Leisure Centre Consultation - Summary of
key findings from the Public Meetings and Focus
Groups**

Report: November 2019



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Executive Summary

Introduction and background

Balaam Leisure Centre has been closed since December 2018 following the discovery of a water leak through the concrete pool tank that also forms the ceiling of the basement gym.

The council consulted on options for the future of Balaam Leisure Centre, between Thursday 3 October and Wednesday 27 November 2019. The consultation included a consultation questionnaire (available on-line and in hard copy), two public meetings and two focus groups.

The consultation options were developed in the context of the Balaam Leisure Centre site being allocated in the council's Local Plan for future housing development from 2028/29, which itself was subject to a statutory consultation process and scrutiny prior to adoption. Therefore, the proposals were developed as interim measures until the site is used for housing development.

This report presents a summary of findings from the public meetings and focus groups that were independently facilitated by Public Perspectives, an independent research and consultation organisation specialising in working with Local Authorities.

The findings in this report form a part of the overall consultation findings, and will be considered alongside other information and issues by the council's Cabinet in February 2020 when making a decision about the future of Balaam Leisure Centre.

Methodology

The public meetings and focus groups provided an opportunity for local residents and former Balaam Leisure Centre members to have informed and in-depth discussions about the future of Balaam Leisure Centre, including the options presented by the council, complementing the information gathered through the consultation questionnaire.

Two public meetings were held during the consultation about the options for the future of Balaam Leisure Centre at Plaistow Library on Thursday 7th November 2019, 10.30am to 12pm and Tuesday 19th November 2019, 6.30pm to 8pm. 41 people attended the public meetings.

Two focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes, were held at Plaistow Library on Wednesday 27th November 2019 in the evening. Nearly 1,300 Members and former members of Balaam Leisure Centre were invited via e-mail. From nearly 200 expressions of interest, 24 were invited to attend representing a mix of gender, age, ethnicity and membership status (cancelled, frozen or moved

membership to another Active Newham leisure centre). In total, 19 people attended the two focus groups.

Key findings

Impact of the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre and experience of alternative provision

Several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre had resulted in their or their family using leisure facilities less and exercising less, with a consequent impact on their health, both physical and mental.

Some attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre meant that the area had lost an important leisure asset, including the loss of a local swimming pool. They said that providing swimming facilities is important for young people, especially in a deprived area, to combat childhood obesity and develop an important skill.

A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre represented the loss of an important public and community resource. They felt this would have a negative impact on community cohesion and health and wellbeing, in an area that is already perceived to be short of public resources and in the context of increasing housing and population growth, when more rather than fewer public facilities are required.

A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre affected young people, older people and disabled people more than others, as well as those on low incomes. This is because the loss of a local swimming pool and local leisure facilities meant travelling further to alternative provision and greater expense, with implications for accessibility, social inclusion and health and wellbeing.

A few attendees at the public meetings and several attendees at the focus groups had used alternative leisure facilities. Some of these said that the alternative facilities were broadly meeting their needs, albeit with some frustrations mentioned.

However, other attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the local alternative provision was not sufficient to meet their needs, either because it was too far away and difficult to access, too busy or that it lacked the same community feel and ethos of Balaam Leisure Centre.

Option 1

A small number of attendees at the public meetings and in the focus groups provided positive comments about Option 1. They said it was the most affordable and quickest option, ensuring that the gym opened as soon as possible and was better than closing the Centre altogether.

Several attendees at the public meetings and most participants in the focus groups strongly opposed Option 1. They said that it was a short-term option, lasting just 5-10 years, whereas they wanted the Centre re-opened permanently. In addition, several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups disliked Option 1 because it does not include a pool.

Option 2

A small number of attendees at the public meetings and in the focus groups spoke positively about Option 2. They said that it was similar to Option 1 in that it was fairly affordable and quick, and also created additional studio space, which they valued.

Several attendees at the public meetings and most participants in the focus groups opposed Option 2. This was for similar reasons they opposed Option 1 – they said that its lifespan was too short and that it lacked the option for a pool to be reinstated.

Option 3

This option received more balanced reviews compared to Options 1 and 2. On one side, a small number of attendees at the public meetings and some participants in the focus groups expressed support or at least made positive comments about Option 3. They said that the repairs were more long-term and valued the reinstatement of the training pool, as well as the potential to convert the main pool into useable space.

However, in contrast, some attendees at the public meeting and focus groups said Option 3 was too expensive and would take too long, especially if the site was to be sold for housing in 2028. In addition, they said that the training pool had only limited appeal and that they wanted the main pool reinstated.

Option 4

A small number of attendees at the public meetings and focus groups intimated support for this option. This was partly due to the lack of perceived value in spending public money to re-open the Centre for a short period of time and mainly because they wanted more, affordable, housing in the local area.

A few attendees in the public meetings and focus groups said that the options were designed to push them towards selecting Option 4. This is because they felt that the other three Options were either too short-term or too expensive and therefore they were reluctantly pushed towards supporting Option 4.

Most other attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly opposed the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre. They re-stressed that the Centre is an important local public and community asset, in an area of deprivation and a perceived lack of facilities. They said that the closure of the Centre would have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of local residents, community cohesion and the ability of local people, especially young people, to learn to swim.

Alternative options

Several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly asserted alternative options to the four mentioned previously. These alternative options focussed on removing the Local Plan housing designation and not selling the site for housing, opening the Centre permanently (or at least replacing it with another Centre nearby), and re-opening the main pool.

London Borough of Newham: Balaam Leisure Centre Consultation - Summary of key findings from the Public Meetings and Focus Groups

Main report

Section 1: Introduction

Introduction and background

- 1.1. Balaam Leisure Centre has been closed since December 2018 following the discovery of a water leak through the concrete pool tank that also forms the ceiling of the basement gym.
- 1.2. The council consulted on options for the future of Balaam Leisure Centre, between Thursday 3 October and Wednesday 27 November 2019. The consultation included a consultation questionnaire (available on-line and in hard copy), two public meetings and two focus groups.
- 1.3. The consultation options were developed in the context of the Balaam Leisure Centre site being allocated in the council's Local Plan for future housing development from 2028/29, which itself was subject to a statutory consultation process and scrutiny prior to adoption. Therefore, the proposals were developed as interim measures until the site is used for housing development.
- 1.4. This report presents a summary of findings from the public meetings and focus groups that were independently facilitated by Public Perspectives, an independent research and consultation organisation specialising in working with Local Authorities.
- 1.5. The findings in this report form a part of the overall consultation findings, and will be considered alongside other information and issues by the council's Cabinet in February 2020 when making a decision about the future of Balaam Leisure Centre.

Methodology

- 1.6. The public meetings and focus groups provided an opportunity for local residents and former Balaam Leisure Centre members to have informed and in-depth discussions about the future of Balaam Leisure Centre, including the options presented by the council, complementing the information gathered through the consultation questionnaire.
- 1.7. **Public meetings:** Two public meetings were held during the consultation about the options for the future of Balaam Leisure Centre at Plaistow Library on Thursday 7th November 2019, 10.30am to 12pm and Tuesday 19th November 2019, 6.30pm to 8pm. The meetings were advertised on the Balaam Leisure Centre consultation pages hosted on the council's website and through the council's communication channels. 41 people attended the public meetings, broken down as follows:

Date of public meeting	Number of attendees	Active Newham Membership status
Thursday 7 th November 2019, 10.30am to 12pm	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 froze membership of Balaam Leisure Centre • 5 moved membership to another Active Newham leisure centre • 7 not members of Balaam Leisure Centre
Tuesday 19 th November 2019, 6.30pm to 8pm	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 cancelled membership of Balaam Leisure Centre • 2 froze membership of Balaam Leisure Centre • 8 moved membership to another Active Newham leisure centre • 14 not members of Balaam Leisure Centre

- 1.8. The public meetings began with a presentation about the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre and the options for the future to stimulate an informed discussion. This was followed by a plenary Q&A and discussion session. The meetings finished with an opportunity for attendees to visit 'Discussion stations' for each of the options, where they could discuss the option and their views in more depth and complete a postcard about each option to capture their views on it (the public meeting plan/agenda is included at Appendix 1).
- 1.9. **Focus groups:** Two focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes, were held at Plaistow Library on Wednesday 27th November 2019 in the evening. Nearly 1,300 Members and former members of Balaam Leisure Centre were invited via e-mail. From nearly 200 expressions of interest, 24 were invited to attend representing a mix of gender, age, ethnicity and membership status (cancelled, frozen or moved membership to another Active Newham leisure centre). A thank you payment of £50 cash was provided to participants to encourage attendance, cover expenses and thank them for their time and effort. In total, 19 people attended the two focus groups. The focus group discussion guide is included at Appendix 2.
- 1.10. **Reporting:** Notes were taken during the public meeting, alongside reviewing the comments on the postcards.
- 1.11. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and reviewed as part of producing this report. A thematic analysis of the discussions has been conducted to identify key issues and findings. It also helps identify strength and volume of opinion and any differences between different types of participants.
- 1.12. Given the qualitative/discursive nature of this part of the consultation, level of opinion is generally presented textually rather than quantitatively. For example, the report will tend to indicate if a view was held by a small number/few participants, some/several participants or a majority/most participants. It will also tend to indicate if the view was one that was strongly expressed.
- 1.13. Quotes have been used to provide evidence and help bring the findings to life.¹

¹ In the interests of succinctness, in most cases we have provided just one or two quotes to evidence a point. The quotes have been selected to best exemplify a point. If a quote is not presented from a particular type of participant, it does not mean that those participants did not support the point. The preceding text before the quote will make it clear who did and did not support the point.

Section 2: Summary of findings

- 2.1. A general point of note is that similar comments and points were made in the public meetings and in the two focus groups. Similarly, there is generally consistency in opinions across different types of participants, whatever their demographic background or membership status. The findings tend to be fairly negative in tone, which is partly to be expected given the nature of the consultation and the options available.

Impact of the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre

- 2.2. Several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre had resulted in their or their family using leisure facilities less and exercising less, with a consequent impact on their health, both physical and mental.
- 2.3. As some of the focus group participants said:

“I used to go to the gym at Balaam Leisure Centre five days a week. It was so close and easy to get to, it was part of my life, my daily routine. Since its closed, I do less exercise. I try to play football and occasionally I go to another gym, but I do a lot less than I used to. I definitely feel less fit now.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“I used to really enjoy going to Balaam [Leisure Centre]. I used to swim and use the gym several days a week. It was good for my physical and mental wellbeing. Just getting out the house, doing something, working up a sweat and interacting with other people. I’ve stopped doing that now, which isn’t good for me.” *(Female, aged 18-34, White British/Irish)*

- 2.4. Some attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre meant that the area had lost an important leisure asset, including the loss of a local swimming pool. They said that providing swimming facilities was important for young people, especially in a deprived area, to combat childhood obesity and develop an important skill. Similarly, they said that nearby schools now have further to go for swimming lessons, which was cutting into pupils’ break times or lessons.
- 2.5. As some of the focus group participants said:

“There’s other gyms I guess, but the biggest loss here was the swimming pool. My children were learning to swim there, it was just really convenient. It’s not as easy to get to other swimming pools and it can be really hard to book a place. My children go swimming but it’s made our life more difficult and I can’t take them now because it clashes with my work. It means I’ve lost some important time with my family.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“It [Balaam Leisure Centre] was used by local schools for their swimming lessons. I heard that it takes them twice as long to get to the new swimming pool, which eats into their lesson. Learning to swim is a really important skill, especially in a deprived area where parents can’t afford swimming lessons. I heard that the borough has a high rate of childhood obesity and taking away an important leisure centre and not making it easy for children to swim and take up exercise is going in the wrong direction.” *(Male, aged 18-34, White British/Irish)*

2.6. A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre represented the loss of an important public and community resource. They felt this would have a negative impact on community cohesion and health and wellbeing, in an area that is already perceived to be short of public resources and in the context of increasing housing and population growth, when more rather than less public facilities are required.

2.7. As one focus group participant said:

“I just think it’s a huge loss to the local community [i.e. the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre]. It was a really good community facility, providing a local space for people from different parts of the local community to spend time together and improve their physical and mental health. This area [Plaistow/Balaam Leisure Centre area] is already lacking community resources and facilities and is more deprived than some other areas. The irony is that they’re thinking of building more houses, but they’re taking away a public resource at the time they need to be doing the opposite – they should be investing in places like Balaam rather than selling it off for housing.”
(Female, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)

2.8. A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre affected young people, older people and disabled people more than others, as well as those on low incomes. This is because the loss of a local swimming pool and local leisure facilities meant travelling further to alternative provision and greater expense, with implications for accessibility, social inclusion and health and wellbeing.

2.9. As one focus group participant said:

“It’s the young people, disabled people and older people and other people on low incomes that lose out the most. I can drive to other places or afford to go somewhere else, but these people can’t. It’s less convenient, too far or too expensive for them to get to these other places. And it is these people that are most in need of learning to swim or leisure facilities. It will have a greater negative impact on them than others. They’ll do less exercise and interact less with other people, which will affect their physical and mental health.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

Use of alternative leisure facilities

2.10. A few attendees at the public meetings and several attendees at the focus groups had used alternative leisure facilities. Some of these said that the alternative facilities were broadly meeting their needs, albeit with some frustrations mentioned.

2.11. As some focus group participants said:

“I now use the facilities at my work. It is fine for me. It was a bit annoying and frustrating at first, but I’m used to it now and I’m doing as much exercise as I used to and it’s meeting my needs.” *(Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)*

“We now use all the other local facilities, at East Ham, Newham Leisure Centre and Atherton Leisure Centre. It’s fine, I liked that Balaam Leisure Centre was closer by for us, but we’ve got used to it and we’re making do.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

2.12. However, other attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the local alternative provision was not sufficient to meet their needs, for the following reasons:

- Atherton Leisure Centre was considered too far away and taking too long to get to, especially if using public transport because two buses are required.
- Newham Leisure Centre was considered to be very busy and crowded, and it is difficult to book classes and find space. It is also further away and traffic can add to the journey time. A recent change in bus provision has made it more difficult to travel there too. It is also considered less personable and community focussed compared to Balaam Leisure Centre.
- East Ham Leisure Centre was less used as an alternative, but was not seen as having the same quality of facilities and classes as Balaam Leisure Centre.
- Private gyms were not considered to be adequate alternatives, partly due to travelling distance and partly because they lack the community feel of Balaam and do not include a swimming pool.
- In general, Balaam was seen as more convenient than the alternatives, and also slightly cheaper.

2.13. As some focus group participants said:

Atherton Leisure Centre

“Atherton is a really nice leisure centre, but it’s just too far for me. I tried it a couple of times, but it’s too far to walk and you have to get two buses to get there. It’s not easy or convenient to get to.” *(Female, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

Newham Leisure Centre

“I’ve been to Newham Leisure Centre a few times. It is ‘alright’, but it just feels a bit soulless. Balaam had a really good local, community feel about it. Everyone knew each other. It is just really busy and crowded and lacking that personal touch at Newham [Leisure Centre].” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“They used to have really good classes at Balaam [Leisure Centre]. You could always get a place and the teachers were excellent. It’s not the same at Newham Leisure Centre, it’s really busy and you can’t always book a spot, and I don’t think the classes are as good.” *(Female, aged 55+, Non-White British/Irish)*

“Newham Leisure Centre isn’t actually that close. It depends where you live. It’s too far for me to walk and it isn’t safe to walk in the dark. There’s too much traffic to drive, although it does have a car park and getting a bus isn’t that easy, especially because some of the routes have changed. Balaam Leisure Centre was a lot more convenient, it was local.” *(Female, aged 55+, White British/Irish)*

East Ham Leisure Centre

“The kids now go swimming at East Ham Leisure Centre. It’s fine, but it’s just not as good. It’s not as close and the changing rooms are a bit manky. They were better at

Balaam, especially when they refurbished it.” (Female, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)

Private gyms

“There’s not any private gyms near here. The closest ones are in Canning Town and that’s a good walk away. Plus, I just don’t like them. I don’t like the ethos or the feel, I much prefer using a council run leisure centre and one like Balaam that felt part of the local community, something for local people. And anyway, I used to like swimming and the private gyms don’t have swimming pools.” (Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)

General comments about Balaam Leisure Centre, its closure and the consultation

- 2.14. Some participants in the focus groups said they had experienced poor communications around the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre and when they expected it to be open. This meant that they had not explored alternative options until recently and had been paying their membership fees despite not using the Centre. As these focus group participants said:

“I went to go for my usual workout and swim and there was just this sign saying it was closed and nothing else. I kept on ringing up to find out what was going on and I kept on being fobbed off, being told that it would open soon or they didn’t know what was happening. It was a different answer each time.” (Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)

“I kept on paying my monthly fees, thinking it would open soon. There was no information about how long it would take. Why’s it taken them 11 months to get to this position? In that time, every month, the fees kept on flying out my bank account, which adds up to quite a bit. I’m now planning to visit the other centres to see if I want to stay a member and use them, but I didn’t do that at first because I thought Balaam would open within a few weeks or months.” (Male, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)

- 2.15. A few of the attendees at the public meeting said that they did not think many local people knew about the consultation. About half of those that attended the focus groups were not aware of the consultation before being invited to the groups. Some of these participants said they thought that the consultation should have been more widely promoted and questioned whether the council would listen:

“I don’t understand why I didn’t know about the consultation. If you could write to me to invite me to attend this focus group, why couldn’t they write to let me know about the consultation. It’s [Balaam Leisure Centre] important and I’m disappointed that the consultation hasn’t been widely promoted so that local residents can put pressure on the council. I’m not sure they’ll listen to us.” (Female, aged 55+, Non-White British/Irish)

- 2.16. Some attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that they were not aware of the Local Plan consultation and did not support the Balaam Leisure Centre site being designated for housing under the Plan. These participants strongly said that the council’s proposed future options are flawed because they do not extend beyond 2028 (when the site

is designated for housing), whereas they want Balaam Leisure Centre to be re-established permanently and do not want the site used for housing. Similarly, they said that the area is short of community facilities and that more provision is needed, not less, due to housing and population growth.

2.17. As some focus group participants said:

“Did they consult about it?! Did they do it properly? [Local Plan consultation about Balaam Leisure Centre site]. I didn’t know about it and I don’t know anyone that did. The first time I heard about it was when I read about the Balaam Leisure Centre consultation and it was mentioned there. It is like the council were trying to sneak this through. They’ve been trying to close Balaam Leisure Centre for years.” *(Female, aged 55+, Non-White British/Irish)*

“This is the first I’ve heard about the Local Plan and selling the site for housing. I’m totally against that. We’ve got enough housing in the area. They keep on building housing but taking away facilities, which means that gap just keeps getting bigger. We need a leisure centre, not more housing. The council should be planning for this.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

2.18. A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the forthcoming Leisure Strategy should take into consideration the results of the consultation about Balaam Leisure Centre and inform the decision about its future. As part of this, they said that they did not consider the alternative provision to be sufficient to meet local need.

2.19. As the following focus group participants said:

“Surely they shouldn’t make a decision before the Leisure Strategy review is conducted? That’s got to influence the future of Balaam Leisure Centre. If it is done properly I’d expect that it would say that this area needs Balaam Leisure Centre.” *(Female, aged 55+, White British/Irish)*

“Without Balaam Leisure Centre there will be a gap in local leisure provision. The other centres are not suitable alternatives. I’d hope that the demand and supply assessments that will be part of the Leisure Strategy will show that to be the case.” *(Male, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)*

Discussions about the Options

Option 1

- Concrete repairs, with estimated longevity of 5-10 years
- Reinstatement of basement gym and ground floor studio only
- Refit of ground floor and basement changing
- Provision of platform lift
- Closure of main pool hall

Option 1 would take approximately 95 weeks (22 months) and would cost approximately £883,000.

2.20. A small number of attendees at the public meetings and in the focus groups provided positive comments about Option 1. They said it was the most affordable and quickest option, ensuring that the gym opened as soon as possible and was better than closing the Centre altogether.

2.21. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“It’s the quickest and cheapest way to get the gym open.” (Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)

“When I first looked at this I preferred Option 1. I only used the gym, so it would work for me. It is the quickest and cheapest option, which is important if the site will be turned into housing in a few years.” (Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)

2.22. Several attendees at the public meetings and most participants in the focus groups strongly opposed Option 1. They said that it was a short-term option, lasting just 5-10 years, whereas they wanted the Centre re-opened permanently. In addition, several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups disliked Option 1 because it does not include a pool.

2.23. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“I don’t like this option – no pool and I want the Centre to stay open after 2028! Build housing elsewhere.” (Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)

“It’s just too short [Option 1]. I want it [Balaam Leisure Centre] open for more than just 5-10 years [referring to the 5-10 years concrete repairs] and I don’t want it turned into housing. It should be refurbished and opened permanently.” (Female, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)

“Option 1 is too short a lifespan and it doesn’t include a pool. It’s just not enough to meet our needs and would feel like an expensive token approach to it all. You either do it right, to last, or not at all.” (Male, aged 18-34, White British/Irish)

2.24. A small number of attendees at the public meetings and focus groups asked why this option only included concrete repairs of 5-10 years and enquired about the timings, costs and feasibility of this option having concrete repairs that would last longer. They said this represented better value for money, in case the site of the Centre was not turned into housing

in 2028, due to either delays in implementing the housing development or a change in the Local Plan housing designation for the site. They said longer concrete repairs would open up the possibility of Balaam Leisure Centre remaining open for longer or potentially permanently. As this focus group participant said:

“I might consider this option if the concrete repairs were for longer. You don’t know what will happen by 2028 and whether the site will be turned into housing or a developer interested in it. Concrete repairs of just 5-10 years is too short term and short-sighted and they could find themselves needing to do it again in a few years if the Centre remained open. They’re better off investing in longer concrete repairs in case the Centre can stay open longer, which I’d like it to. I’d be more in support of that.” *(Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)*

Option 2

- Concrete repairs, with estimated longevity of 5-10 years
- Reinstatement of basement gym and ground floor studio only
- Refit of ground floor and basement changing
- Provision of platform lift
- Conversion of existing training pool area to studio space
- Closure of main pool hall

Option 2 would take approximately 103 weeks (24 months) and would cost approximately £1,099,000.

2.25. A small number of attendees at the public meetings and in the focus groups spoke positively about Option 2. They said that it was similar to Option 1 in that it was fairly affordable and quick, and also created additional studio space, which they valued.

2.26. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“More floor space is good and still a quick and affordable option. Better than Option 1.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“I prefer this option to the previous one [Option 1]. It is similar, but for a little extra money and time you get the studio space. Something I used to like about Balaam Leisure Centre were the classes and I think there’s a need for that sort of space.” *(Female, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)*

2.27. Several attendees at the public meetings and most participants in the focus groups opposed Option 2. This was for similar reasons they opposed Option 1 – they said that its lifespan was too short and that it lacked the option for a pool to be reinstated.

2.28. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“I dislike this option. It costs more and takes longer than Option 1, for little more. We need a proper and permanent leisure centre, with a pool.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“It’s not really much different to Option 1. Sure you get the studio space, which I guess is useful, but it’s still only a 5-10 year option and there’s no pool, so I can’t see how this works for us locally.” *(Male, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)*

“It’s no good. It still doesn’t meet our criteria of wanting a pool and being a permanent opening of a leisure centre. And you’ve got to wait a bit longer for this one and spend more money.” *(Female, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

2.29. Similar to Option 1, a small number of attendees at the public meetings and focus groups asked why Option 2 only included concrete repairs of 5-10 years and enquired about the timings, costs and feasibility of this option having concrete repairs that would last longer to allow the Centre to remain open beyond 2028.

Option 3

- Concrete repairs, with estimated longevity of 10+ years
- Reinstatement of basement gym, ground floor studio and training pool only
- Refit of ground floor and basement changing
- Provision of platform lift
- Closure of main pool hall

Option 3 would take approximately 125 weeks (29 months) and would cost approximately £2,483,000.

If the main pool hall is closed, an alternative use could be found for this space. However, this would cost an additional £670,000 to £790,000.

2.30. This option received more balanced reviews compared to Options 1 and 2. On one side, a small number of attendees at the public meetings and some participants in the focus groups expressed support or at least made positive comments about Option 3. They said that the repairs were more long-term and valued the reinstatement of the training pool, as well as the potential to convert the main pool into useable space.

2.31. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“Has the potential for being open for 10+ years, plus a training pool. Would be even better if they made use of the main pool space for a gym or studio.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“This feels more like what we want. It could last over 10 years, which means that if the site isn’t used for housing we could keep the Centre for longer.” *(Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)*

“I prefer this Option to Options 1 and 2. It feels like we’d be getting our leisure centre back to nearly what it was and making best use of the space, including using the pool space for something instead of just cordoning it off. It feels like a longer-term and more substantial option.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“At least with this option you’re getting a pool back. It might only be the training pool, but it’s good for young kids and can help them learn to swim.” *(Male, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)*

2.32. However, in contrast, some attendees at the public meeting and focus groups said Option 3 was too expensive and would take too long, especially if the site was to be sold for housing in 2028. In addition, they said that the training pool had only limited appeal and that they wanted the main pool reinstated.

2.33. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“Too expensive and takes too long. Not worth it if the Centre is to close in a few years.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“Training pool is good, but we need a main pool too. Would be better if built housing elsewhere and re-opened Balaam Leisure Centre permanently.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“This is a stupid option. It says it would take 29 months to complete, and assuming they stuck to that they’d probably only have the Centre open in 2023. So you’d be spending all that money for just five years. If the Centre could stay open permanently then it might make more sense, but if that was the case then I’d also want the main pool to be opened.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“It feels like a lot of money and more time, for not very much gain, especially if the Centre closes a few years later.” *(Female, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“The training pool is O.K, but it’s only small and just 3 foot deep, you can’t swim properly in it or do lengths. It’s no good for proper swimming and inadequate for teaching young people how to swim. It’s only really good for parents and babies.” *(Male, aged 18-34, White British/Irish)*

Option 4

- Permanent closure - closure and demolition to ground and bring forward the redevelopment of the site for housing

2.34. A small number of attendees at the public meetings and focus groups intimated support for this option. This was partly due to the lack of perceived value in spending public money to re-open the Centre for a short period of time and mainly because they wanted more, affordable, housing in the local area.

2.35. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“The other options are a waste of money, if the Centre isn’t re-opened permanently.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“Closing the centre would create more affordable and social housing for local people.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“I’m not against the idea of more housing. I’m trying to get a house, so the more options the better. As long as it is affordable housing that local people can buy then I think it is better to close the Centre, save the money and just get on and build the housing.” *(Male, aged 18-34, White British/Irish)*

2.36. A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that the options felt like they are designed to push them towards selecting Option 4. This is because they felt that the other three Options were either too short-term or too expensive and therefore they were reluctantly being pushed towards supporting Option 4.

2.37. As these focus group participants said:

“It seems to me that these options are forcing me to support Option 4 and close the Centre. It feels like the decision has already been made and this is the option they want us to select. I don’t want to do that, but if these are the only options then that might be the best thing to do. Option 1 and 2 are just a waste of money because they only last five years and Option 3 is really expensive and could be a waste of money if the site is sold for housing.” *(Male, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)*

“I don’t think we should spend this sort of money on something that’s only going to be open for 5 years. It seems wasteful and what else could that money be spent on? I’d rather the Centre be re-opened permanently, but if that’s not possible then I guess closing the Centre is the best way forward.” *(Female, aged 18-34, Non-White British/Irish)*

2.38. Most other attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly opposed the closure of Balaam Leisure Centre. They re-stressed that the Centre is an important public and community asset, in an area of deprivation and a perceived lack of facilities. They said that closure of the Centre would have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of local residents, community cohesion and the ability of local people, especially young people, to learn to swim.

2.39. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“Unacceptable! We need a leisure Centre to meet local needs – think of the health of local people! Build housing elsewhere and reinstate our leisure centre permanently!” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“I don’t like this option – against closing the facility and losing the pools and leisure space. Bad for community, health and loss of a valuable public resource. Plaistow needs more, not less facilities.” *(Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)*

“I’m totally against the closure of the Centre. It is so important to the local community. This is an area of diversity and deprivation. In a time of housing and population growth we need more, not less, community facilities. Closing the Centre permanently puts the physical and mental health of local people, including children, at risk. The loss of a local swimming pool will make it harder for children from deprived backgrounds to learn to swim. The Centre was an important way of bringing the community together. I’d say it is an essential community and public resource that we should fight to protect.” *(Female, aged 35-54, White British/Irish)*

Alternative options

2.40. Several attendees at the public meetings and focus groups strongly asserted alternative options to the four mentioned previously. These options focussed on changing the Local Plan housing designation and not selling the site for housing, opening the Centre permanently (or at least replacing it with another Centre nearby), and re-opening the main pool.

2.41. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“A fifth option – scrap housing plan, re-open Balaam Leisure Centre fully and permanently, with a pool to meet local needs.” (Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)

“Balaam Leisure Centre should be re-opened as a state-of-the-art leisure centre for the local community – putting long-term and permanent facilities back into the area.” (Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)

“Balaam Leisure Centre is one of the few local facilities in the area, in an area where providing access to community facilities and encouraging healthy living are really important. It’s important physically and socially and to be a focal point for the local community. The idea of selling the Centre for housing is outrageous. We need more community facilities, not less, especially with the housing and population growth. They should invest in the Centre for the long-term, re-open it permanently and fully.” (Female, aged 55+, White British/Irish)

“We’ve got enough housing, we don’t need any more and it’s only a small site, it won’t make any difference. They should change the housing designation in the Local Plan and re-open the Centre for the long-term.” (Male, aged 35-54+, Non-White British/Irish)

“I want to see Balaam Leisure Centre opened fully, back to how it was, if not better. That means repairing it, refurbishing it and opening it permanently. And not just the gym and studios, they need to re-open the main pool too. Balaam Leisure Centre, including the pool are really important for the local community and local people’s health.” (Female, aged 35-54+, White British/Irish)

2.42. A few attendees at the public meetings and focus groups said that, as a compromise, the council could consider building housing on top of Balaam Leisure Centre. As part of this, they said that the housing should be affordable for local people.

2.43. As these public meeting and focus group attendees said:

“Build affordable housing on top of the Centre, best of both worlds.” (Postcard comment from attendee at Public Meeting)

“I’m not against the idea of them building housing, but can they not build on top of the Centre? That way you get more housing and you keep the leisure centre. But the housing should be affordable, and I mean properly affordable, so that local people can buy them.” (Female, aged 35-54, Non-White British/Irish)

2.44. In response to the above suggestion, some public meeting and focus group attendees said that they did not think this would work. They queried the potential size of such a leisure facility and whether local people, other than those that lived in the new housing, would be able to access the facilities.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Public meeting plan

Balaam Leisure Centre Consultation

Workshop Plan: 7th November 2019, 10.30am-12pm / 19th November 2019, 6.30pm-8pm

Note: The following provides an outline to help structure the meetings and discussions, ensuring that key aspects of the consultation are discussed and that all participants get an opportunity to input in an informed way. The meetings will be managed flexibly depending on the number of attendees, their arrival times and the flow of the discussion.

Time (approx.)	Activity
9.30am / 5.30pm	Room set-up
10.30am/6.30pm (we will open the doors and be ready 10-15 minutes before the start time)	Arrival
10.35pm/6.35pm	Welcome Mention: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce self and role• Introduce purpose of session• Outline broad structure/focus• Introduce key council officers• Anonymity and confidentiality• Encourage open and honest comments• Range of views encouraged – positive and negative• Ask people to respect others' viewpoints, be polite, allow others to speak and not all speak at once• Any questions before we start?
10.45pm/6.45pm	Presentation outlining the background to the consultation and each of the options
11am/7pm	Q&A and general discussion, following the presentation
11.15am/7.15pm	Discussion stations: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendees to walk around the room, going to stations to consider and discuss each option, writing thoughts on a postcard.• c20 minutes (i.e. about 5 minutes per station).
11.35am/7.35pm	Plenary feedback and discussion/Q&A: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each discussion station host to provide c1-2 minute feedback of key points (see staff briefing for more details).• After feedback about each option, attendees will be asked to validate and add to the comments made by the host.• Following the feedback, there will be a final chance for further questions and discussion.

11.55am/7.55pm	Close and thank, outlining next steps and encouraging attendees to respond to the consultation questionnaire on-line
12pm/8pm	Exit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendees leave but staff are available for informal chats/discussions. • Public Perspectives to collect postcards/materials for analysis.
12.15pm/8.15pm	De-brief – quick (5-10 minutes) catch-up to reflect on key points raised by attendees and refine approach for next session

Appendix 2 – Focus group discussion guide

Please note: This is a discussion guide and will be used flexibly depending on the flow of discussion. This means that not every question will necessarily be asked in the way or order outlined below. However, we will make sure that all the key issues are explored fully.

On arrival

- The room will have posters of each Option on the walls to help participants familiarise themselves and to use as stimulus later in the discussion
- Sign-in
- Name badge
- Light refreshments
- Complete consent forms

Introduction (c2 mins)

Key points to note

- Background – why we're here and some of the things we plan to discuss [i.e. The leisure centre has been closed since 21 December 2018, when concrete fell from the underside of the training pool through to the basement gym. Major repair works are needed. The council is now consulting on various options for the future of the centre, which we will discuss with you today.]
- Introduce facilitator
- Introduce observers
- Ask to record the interview
- Stress anonymity and confidentiality
- Set ground rules – no right or wrong answers, honest and open, range of views encouraged
- Respect different opinions
- One voice at a time
- Allow others the space and time to share their views
- What happens to the information
- Any questions?
- Before you were invited here today, were you aware of the consultation? Had you responded to it?

Key lines of questioning

Warm-up (c10 minutes)

- Just so we can get to know each other a little bit, in pairs can you share three things and then feedback to the rest of the group:
 - Your name and where you live
 - Why you decided to take part in this focus group
 - Your experience of using Balaam Leisure Centre in the past

Use of Balaam Leisure Centre (c10-15 mins)

- How did you, and your family, use Balaam Leisure Centre?

Prompt:

- What did you do there?
- How often did you visit it?
- What did you think about it?

Impact of closing Balaam Leisure Centre (c10-15 mins)

- What impact did closing the Leisure Centre have on you, and your family?
- What did you do in response to the closure?

Prompt:

- Did you cancel, freeze or move your membership? Why?

Alternative provision (c10-15 mins)

- What do you think of the alternative provision available?

Prompt:

- Where, if anywhere, do you visit now?
- What is your experience of the alternative provision? [explore issues around travel, accessibility, space, availability of provision, meeting need]

Views on proposals/options (c30 mins – approximately 5 minutes per option and time for wider discussion about the options overall and alternative options)

- In general, what do you think about the options for the future of Balaam Leisure Centre?
- What do you think about Option 1?

Prompt (these will be repeated for each option):

- What do you like about this option?
- What don't you like?
- What impact could this option have on you (and your family)?
- How would this option affect your use of the centre and other provision locally?
- How could this option be revised to make it better for you (and your family)?
- How could any concerns or negative impacts around this option be reduced (mitigated)?

- What do you think about Option 2?
- What do you think about Option 3?
- What do you think about Option 4?

- What other/alternative options would you like considered? Why?

Summing up (c5-10 mins)

- Is there anything else you would like to say around this subject?
- Facilitator to sum up the key messages identified from the discussion to sense check that understood correctly.
- Facilitator to outline next steps – what will happen to the information, timescales and decision-making process.
- Any final points or questions?
- Participants encouraged to keep up to date with progress by visiting: www.newham.gov.uk/balaam.
- Each participant to be given thank you payment (£50).

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