

# Gurnell Leisure Centre Development

## Report from Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, Independent Chair of Sounding Board, for February Cabinet

1 February 2023

Dear Councillors,

### **Gurnell Leisure Centre Redevelopment: Progress Update / Sounding Board**

Cabinet will shortly be considering a report with recommendations from officers on future plans for Gurnell Leisure Centre. As Independent Chair of the Gurnell Sounding Board I offer you a summary of the discussions at the Sounding Board sessions and my observations on these. This summary is intended to capture the areas of consensus as well as the areas of disagreement which I hope will be helpful to the Council in deciding on how best to proceed with this complex and challenging project.

The Sounding Board was established as a way for the Council to engage with interested parties and stakeholders on its emerging plans to replace Gurnell Leisure Centre. It is a forum for stakeholders to discuss and contribute to the plans as they are developed and also to act as a way of better informing stakeholders on how the scheme is progressing. I agreed to take on the role of the Independent Chair of the Sounding Board, and throughout my time as Chair have sought to steer the discussion in a positive and constructive way, acting as an intermediary between the Council team and the community stakeholders.

There are strong and passionate views held by many people on the project, and I would like to thank the Council, represented by its officers and the architect team, for seeking to engage with the Sounding Board membership openly, for listening and seeking to understand the issues raised. I would like also to thank all members of the Sounding Board for their engagement and for giving up their time to participate in this process.

The individuals and organisations invited to join the Sounding Board membership were chosen with the intention of balancing a wide range of stakeholder interests, while also allowing Sounding Board meetings to be focused and productive, and to encourage views to be openly and freely shared. The Sounding Board membership has grown since its establishment, and the following organisations are currently represented and are standing invitees:

- Anti-Tribalism Movement
- Brent River & Canal Society
- Drayton Community Association
- Stop The Towers
- Ealing Matters
- Ealing Skatepark
- Ealing Swimming Club
- Empowering Action (EASE)
- Everyone Active (Operator)
- Featherstone School Sport Partnership
- GLL (Operator)
- Gurnell Grove Residents Association
- Pitshanger Community Association (PCA)
- Pitshanger Village Traders Association
- Save Gurnell

- Sport England (Sports Planning)
- Swim England (Facilities Development)

Since its inception, the Sounding Board has met on the following dates :

- Inaugural meeting (no.1) - Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2022 (virtual)
- Sounding Board no.2 - Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2022
- Sounding Board no.3 - Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2022
- Sounding Board no.4 - Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2022

Not every organisation listed above has been able to attend every session: details of attendance for each meeting can be found in the record of the meetings which can be found on the Council's website.

In addition to the core Sounding Board meetings, a 'visioning' workshop was held on Tuesday 17 May 2022, to seek the membership's views on the make-up and functionality of a new Leisure facility through a facilitated session.

In accordance with the Sounding Board Terms of Reference, notes of the Sounding Board meetings and the visioning workshop were circulated to attendees after each session and are also uploaded onto the Council's website for general viewing. The notes taken at each Sounding Board session can be accessed by visiting [www.ealing.gov.uk/gurnell](http://www.ealing.gov.uk/gurnell).

Whilst the discussion and debate at Sounding Board meetings have remained cordial and professional, there have been some frank and challenging areas of disagreement on the emerging findings of the Feasibility Study. This letter is intended to act as a concise summary of the key matters arising from the Sounding Board sessions which I consider Cabinet should be aware of in deciding on the project. As for areas where I consider there to be a broad consensus from across the membership of the Sounding Board and where positive progress can be reported, these can be summarised as follows:

**1. There is a continuing need for a community Leisure Centre in this location**

Although the Council could in theory permanently close Gurnell and not replace it at all, there has been no call for such an approach from any member of the Sounding Board. On the contrary, there has been strong emphasis on the need to reopen the Leisure Centre at the earliest opportunity to fill a gap in provision, which also reflects the feedback which the Council has received through its separate online consultation. On this basis, I consider that there is unanimous support from the Sounding Board for the Council to continue to pursue the reopening of Gurnell Leisure Centre as soon as possible, albeit that the size of a replacement scheme and the strategy for funding it both remain contentious issues as set out below.

**2. The existing Leisure Centre building is at end of life, and refurbishment would be neither financially feasible nor sustainable over the long term**

At its second meeting, the Sounding Board received a summary from the architect team on the work to appraise the existing Leisure Centre building and to assess the viability of refurbishing it. This included an assessment of the sustainability implications of carrying out a Low Energy Retrofit of the existing building as compared with erecting a new build replacement. As part of this exercise, members of the Sounding Board were also invited on a tour of the existing building. The presentation given by the sustainability consultant was clear and insightful, and members of the Sounding Board were grateful for the evidence and information presented. There was broad

acceptance that, following a thorough assessment of the existing building, it would not be suitable for refurbishment, and it should be demolished to make way for a new facility.

Having established the above principles, it was helpful to see collective agreement on the goal of realising a new leisure centre for the Borough. But this led into more fractious areas of discussion where views differed on precisely how a replacement facility was to be realised, what would be an appropriate size and scope for a new facility, how much it was going to cost and how capital funding is to be secured to pay for it.

Over the course of the Sounding Board sessions, the architect team have presented a range of options both for the size/cost of the prospective Leisure Centre as well as where this might be located within the site. The range of options presented suggests the capital costs of replacement could range between £28m for a 5,500m<sup>2</sup> facility up to £46.1m for a 9,600m<sup>2</sup> facility, with the architect's recommendation at this stage to proceed with an optimised brief for the leisure centre estimated to cost in the order of £39.4m to build an 8,500m<sup>2</sup> facility. It is understood that these costs relate to the net costs of replacing the leisure centre building only and contain exclusions. The architect team has explained the basis for deriving this brief which they suggest arises in response to feedback at the vision workshops as well as through engagement with other leisure stakeholders to generate a brief which best suits the Borough's strategic need and would generate the optimal revenue return when in operation.

The Sounding Board has also heard from Council officers that it remained the position of the Council that a replacement scheme could not be afforded without some form of enabling development on the site to generate capital for the project. The architects have presented their appraisal of the site and have looked at various ways in which the masterplan could be developed, which included considering options to retain the leisure centre in its existing location along Ruislip Road, as well as relocating a replacement leisure centre to elsewhere within the wider site, which might afford a larger space for residential development whilst remaining compliant with planning policy.

The concerns about the conclusions of the Feasibility Study have been summarised in a position statement provided by the Save Gurnell group acting on behalf of the Brent River & Canal Society, the Gurnell Grove Residents Association, Ealing Matters, Draytons' Community Association, Pitshanger Community Association, Save Gurnell and Stop the Towers. A copy of this statement, dated 14 November 2022, is included in full with this summary.

The position statement sets out a list of concerns on the detail of what the group have seen to date, and I would encourage Cabinet to consider these in full. But, in the interests of cutting to the heart of the matter, I identify the following main areas of contention:

- The single largest concern as expressed at the Sounding Board meetings and reflected in the position statement relates to the inclusion of residential development in the scheme and the claim by the Council, refuted by some on the Sounding Board, that this was necessary to support the costs of replacing the leisure centre. There is a strong opposition to any form of tower blocks which would be reminiscent of the previous Ecoworld scheme, with some holding the strong view that there should be no residential development whatsoever and that the Council should look to other means of raising the capital funding to replace Gurnell
- A separate concern, which would be exacerbated by the inclusion of residential development within the scheme, is around the impact of any development on Metropolitan Open Land inclusive of ecological impact and development in the flood plain, with some

holding the strong view that the development should be no larger than the existing facility in terms of footprint and massing

- A further concern, linked to each of the above, was the scope/specification and size of a replacement leisure centre and the costs of replacement, with a view that the brief should be based upon a 'like for like' facility rather than an enhancement on the existing Gurnell Leisure Centre.

I have also received a statement from the Chair of the Pitshanger Village Traders' Association which is also appended to this summary. This statement confirms that the Association:

- would like to see a new leisure centre opened (as it is quite clear that refurbishment of the existing centre is unrealistic) as Pitshanger Lane was frequented by users of the leisure centre
- have not expressed any strong views either for or against housing but have indicated that, if housing were to be included, this would bring additional footfall to Pitshanger Lane which is always welcome
- [notes that] a leisure centre would likely, however, be competition for the relatively newly opened Pitshanger Health and Fitness (on Pitshanger Lane) which has just celebrated its first anniversary.

I suggest that the questions for the Council to consider would thus be:

1. Is the Council in a position to fund the replacement leisure centre through means other than residential enabling development, including through the use of Section 106 monies and other sources of grant funding, as well as direct Council funding, which would avoid the need to include residential development in the scheme?
2. Is the Council satisfied that the 'Optimised 1' brief for the replacement facility which the architect team recommends would offer an appropriate mix to meet need or should this scope be further reduced to bring down the size and cost of the replacement facility?
3. Is the Council satisfied that the 'Optimised 1' brief will not adversely affect other businesses in the area including for example private gyms / health and fitness clubs
4. Subject to the Council's position on the above, is there a cost threshold below which the need for residential enabling development could be avoided? It is suggested by the architect that the scheme costs for a 'like for like' replacement would be about £28m. For example would this scheme be affordable without a requirement for residential development?

This summary was circulated to the Sounding Board membership for comment but I confirm that it represents my own views and observations acting as the Chair. I would be happy to attend any Cabinet meeting to discuss further should this be helpful. Subject to Cabinet's decision on any recommendations, I believe that there would be continued value in retaining the Sounding Board into the future and would advocate for the Council to continue to support it. In this event, I would be happy to continue to chair it.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this summary to you.

Yours faithfully,

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles

Independent Chair Gurnell Sounding Board

Attached:

- Position Statement provided by Save Gurnell dated 14 November 2022
- Statement received from the Pitshanger Village Traders' Association dated 30 January 2022

## Position Statement provided by Save Gurnell dated 14 November 2022

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles

Chair - Gurnell Leisure Centre Sounding Board

Copied to:

Pitshanger Ward Councillors, Ealing North MP.

Community groups on the Sounding Board: Brent River & Canal Society, Gurnell Grove Residents Association, Ealing Matters, Draytons' Community Association, Pitshanger Community Association, Save Gurnell and Stop the Towers.

14<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2022

Dear Sherard,

We are writing to state our joint position on the proposals presented to the Gurnell Sounding Board. This letter has been produced collaboratively by the following groups:

- Brent River & Canal Society
- Gurnell Grove Residents Association
- Ealing Matters
- Draytons' Community Association
- Pitshanger Community Association
- Save Gurnell
- Stop the Towers

The establishment of the Gurnell Sounding Board has been a welcome step forward and that the Council was willing to listen to local groups. It also aligned with Council Leader, Cllr Peter Mason's statement in May 2021, which in relation to regeneration in Ealing he stated, *"from now on communities will be in the driving seat when it comes to regeneration in Ealing"*.

Although we have now been engaged in the Gurnell proposals, there is a strong feeling that we are being driven to an outcome rather than being in the driving seat ourselves. Whilst we accept the need to replace the leisure centre, we do not want to end up in the same situation as the previous scheme i.e., significant sums of taxpayer money spent on a refused planning application.

As it stands, we simply do not foresee how the proposals could be granted planning permission given the last application was rejected due to it constituting inappropriate development on Metropolitan Open Land (MOL). Any proposals including housing would have an adverse impact to MOL and would therefore be rejected when tested against planning policy.

### OUR JOINT POSITION ON THE PROPOSALS PRESENTED TO THE GURNELL SOUNDING BOARD ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. We support the redevelopment of Gurnell Leisure Centre within the existing building footprint and roof height
2. We support the retention of the BMX track, Skate Park and Playground within their existing footprints.

3. We believe that the revised Leisure Centre options presented at Sounding Board Meeting 4 (Optimised 1 and Optimised 2) should be revisited with the Sounding Board members to ascertain whether any further refinement can be made.

Even with the optimisations, the estimated cost of the new Leisure Centre (£39.4m and £35.9m respectively for Optimised 1 and 2) are still excessively high in relation to similar projects. [Spelthorne Leisure Centre - GT3 Architects](#) had a cost of £36m and whilst the pool provision is slightly lower, it includes many of the costly elements that have been reduced/removed from the “Feasibility” option to reduce the cost:

Spelthorne Leisure Centre:

*“The facility boasts both wet and dry facilities, including: an 8 lane 25m Pool, a 4 lane 20m teaching pool with a moving floor, splash pad, a large café to connect with Staines Park, luxury Spa, 6 court sports hall, 3 Squash courts, 2 studios and a state of the art Spin Studio, a 200 station gym, a climbing zone, a soft play area, a flexible multiuse space, 4No. 3g pitches on the roof (utilising the otherwise empty roof space), rooftop community garden space, and cycle trails to connect to the local park.”*

4. We believe that the current estimates for “landscaping” (£3-5m) are excessively high, and the scope of landscaping should be outlined in detail and revisited with the Sounding Board members to bring this cost down.
5. We believe that the funding options have not been adequately progressed. Given the limited funding previously set aside for the project (circa £12.5m) it was clear from the outset that a degree of additional funds would be required, however there has been no apparent progress to seek these funds aside from the enabling development option. Given the MOL designation of the site, enabling development should be the absolute last resort, not the first option. In fact, the architects engaged to deliver the masterplan for the project (Mikhail Riches) are a housing specialist. This leads us to believe that housing was always on the agenda, despite the unsubstantiated need for housing in Ealing due to the yet unpublished 2019/20 Authority Monitoring Report (and five-year land housing supply).
6. We object to any market housing development on this site and ask Ealing Council to uphold national and local planning policy protecting Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land (MOL) from inappropriate development and to uphold its policies in the BRP Countryside Management Plan (Part 1, 1990), Local Agenda 21 Response (1998), Biodiversity Action Plan (2001) and Supplement (2022) and Climate & Ecological Emergency Strategy (2021).
7. We object to any Affordable Housing development on this site given it will not contribute financially as an “enabling development” which is the rationale behind any housing being built. If there were no funding gap this project would simply be redevelopment the leisure centre and housing, affordable or otherwise would not be part of the discussion.
8. We note that the land is wholly within the flood plain of the River Brent and object to any reduction in the flood water storage capacity or increase in the rate of rainwater run-off from the site. In particular, we object to any proposal to create underground parking beneath the Leisure Centre as unsustainable. Any proposals should take full account of Ealing's Local Flood Risk Management Strategy (2016) and clearly evaluate the impacts and costs associated with building in or beside the flood plain in the light of climate change, and on river peak flows, surface water drainage, foul sewer capacity, flood risk management and on-site storage and attenuation.

9. We note that the Council is currently reviewing Ealing's Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). BRCS expert surveyors expect that when that process is complete, substantial areas of neutral grassland habitat in the River Brent floodplain north of the Leisure Centre and the native species hedgerows in and around the main car park and the old hedgerow along Ruislip Road East will all need to be designated as SINCs. This review, when complete, will require a re-evaluation of any planning proposals for Gurnell Leisure Centre and likely constrain these within the existing building footprint and height.
10. We object to any new footbridge over the River Brent within the existing SINC as BRCS experts advise that this would increase disturbance of and damage to riverside habitats within the Long Field SINC and the Gurnell grasslands likely to be designated as SINC in the current review.
11. We note that the existing building and car park emit extensive light pollution into the park affecting bat flight lines and feeding areas and ask that any future lighting scheme be properly designed to minimise any effect on wildlife and to avoid spillage. All such lighting should be switched off at 11pm.

The Council set up the Sounding Board to involve community groups in formulating viable proposals for Gurnell. Although we have consistently engaged with the process, we are concerned that our views are not being taken on board and seek reassurance that these will be properly represented in the report to Cabinet.

Kind regards,

**Louise Simmonds**

On behalf of Brent River & Canal Society, Gurnell Grove Residents Association, Ealing Matters, Draytons' Community Association, Pitshanger Community Association, Save Gurnell and Stop the Towers.





## **PITSHANGER VILLAGE TRADERS' ASSOCIATION**

Dear Sherard

Thank you for your email and the attached Draft Report by yourself and Position Statement from a number of community groups (of which I was entirely unaware).

As you know, I was one of the original invitees to the Sounding Board as Chair of Pitshanger Village Traders' Association (PVTA). As business owners, we may have differing views from other Sounding Board members but will certainly bring a business minded angle to matters which, in the current climate, will be relevant to the discussion.

In discussions with a cross section of my fellow business owners, there is a general consensus that they would like to see a new leisure centre opened (as it is quite clear that refurbishment of the existing centre is unrealistic) as Pitshanger Lane was frequented by users of the leisure centre. They have not expressed any strong views either for or against housing but have indicated that, if housing were to be included, this would bring additional footfall to Pitshanger Lane which is always welcome (if not much needed in the current economic climate). A leisure centre would likely, however, be competition for the relatively newly opened Pitshanger Health and Fitness (on Pitshanger Lane) which has just celebrated its first anniversary.

In my position as Chair of PVTA and a long-standing business owner of 27 years on Pitshanger Lane, I have also been approached by a number of members of the residential

community in Pitshanger who have asked me about the future of Gurnell Leisure Centre. In general, they would like to see a new leisure centre and, again, have not expressed any strong views either for or against housing and, to be fair, it is perhaps because it would not impact them as directly as it would those living closer to Gurnell.

I have noted that the Position Statement on behalf of the community groups specifically references Spelthorne Leisure Centre and provides a link to G3 Architects' webpage in respect of that development which is for a 25m pool, 20m training pool and a myriad of other facilities, each bringing its own revenue stream. I have been made aware of a number of matters pertaining to the development and from a business/financial perspective, it is worth noting the following in respect of consideration of that specific example:

- At Spelthorne Leisure Centre, there will be only a 25m pool (as well as a 20m training pool); Gurnell had a 50m pool which attracted swimming clubs in particular
- In October 2020, Spelthorne Council recognised that revenue would not cover the cost of the scheme and the decision was taken to borrow the full capital figure of £38.4m
- Planning permission for Spelthorne Leisure Centre was granted in June 2021 and funding for the scheme was being sought by Spelthorne Council in early 2022 in order to fix the costs; this was before the significant interest rate rises during the course of the latter stages of 2022 which now sees a higher cost for borrowing
- As at December 2021, Spelthorne District Council was already considering a £17m funding gap in respect of the new leisure centre development (and which it hoped at that time - but could not confirm - would be repaid from revenue having allocated a capital budget of £38.4m for the project to be fully funded by borrowing over a four year period)

I trust this will be of assistance to you in respect of your report to the Council.

Regards

John J Martin  
Chair, Pitshanger Village Traders' Association

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