



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

13th November 2024

Report of the Head of Streetcare Michael Roberts

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected:

Pontardawe
Briton Ferry West
Briton Ferry East
Neath East
Sandfields East
Neath South
Neath North
Cwmllynfell and Ystalyfera
Port Talbot
Bryn and Cwmavon
Margam and Tai-bach
Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen and Lower Brynammon
Baglan

Report Title: Pilot of new Access Approach to Parks and Gardens

Purpose of the Report:

To consider and implement a proposed pilot of changes to the approach taken to open and close parks and gardens.

Executive Summary:

The Neighbourhood Services team is exploring ways to improve efficiency through the management of its resources by implementing relevant changes. Throughout the county borough, parks and gardens are currently opened and closed on a daily basis limiting out of hours access. Owing to staffing issues, during the summer months some parks and gardens could not be locked overnight. During this time period, there was no increase in anti-social behaviour reported which suggested that the locking procedure was of limited benefit. By changing this procedure, it will allow officers to utilise the resource that are required to implement the current approach elsewhere, to deliver a more beneficial service associated with playgrounds. The proposed changes include pedestrian access gates remaining open at all times, with vehicle access gates remaining secured outside of opening hours.

Background:

General

The Council is responsible for the appropriate management of its parks and formal gardens and the public look for such areas to be maintained to a high standard.

Current procedural agreements dictate that Neighbourhood Services staff must open and close formal parks and gardens every morning and evening, seven days a week. The timings of the opening and closure of the parks vary throughout the year in line with daylight hours.

Due to issues with staff resource associated with sickness during the last few months, there have been several parks and gardens across the borough that have frequently remained open. This period commenced in May 2024, and lasted for a period of four months, during which the parks and gardens were only locked for approximately 30 days out of a possible 113 (26%). This percentage could actually be lower due to users still being present in the parks at the time of closure, resulting in the parks having to remain open. This is an agreed practice that our staff are required to follow, to ensure they remain safe whilst undertaking the task as a lone worker.

During the above period there was no increase in complaints to the Council in relation to parks and gardens, and no rise in anti-social behaviour as confirmed by our local PCSO liaison officer. Our local liaison officer gave the below statement in relation to antisocial behaviour in parks and gardens, associated with the period mentioned above:

“So far the only concern that’s been raised by Police colleagues is re Skewen Park. There are quite a lot of incidents there generally, so the park being kept open may cause this to increase. Otherwise, no other concerns raised”.

Skewen Park is not a park that is managed or maintained by the Council.

The initiative, if implemented permanently, would reduce the risk to staff who are attending parks alone at night. There has been a rising number of issues in recent years, resulting in staff being exposed to verbal abuse and physical threats whilst asking members of the public to leave the parks at closure.

It has also been suggested that by leaving parks open to the general public, it will allow the parks to be self-policed. Members of the general public who use the parks out of hours will naturally deter incidents of anti-social behaviour.

It is proposed that an official pilot of the change in arrangements to closing parks and gardens at night commences from the 1st December 2024, and runs for a period of 4 months up until the 1st April 2025. Pedestrian gates would remain open 24 hours a day, however, vehicle gates/bollards would continue to restrict vehicle access. Whilst there is data available as outlined above associated with the period of time that the parks could not be locked on a regular basis, undertaking an official pilot of these changes would provide a fuller understanding of the impact of these assets remaining open. Furthermore, if implemented, the pilot would be during the winter months which would further supplement the data collected from the summer period.

Financial Impacts:

It is essential that service delivery models are reviewed periodically to identify if they are actually providing value for money, especially at such a time where Local Government finances are so thinly stretched. As set out in the executive summary to this report, Neighbourhood Services are reviewing the ways in which services are delivered as part of a transformation programme to ensure the services are as efficient and effective as they can be.

At present, park closing and opening operations are undertaken by a Mobile Ranger (grade 4) on a 39 hour a week split shift contract, to accommodate opening in the morning and closing at night. If the pilot goes ahead and subsequently the changes to the arrangements are made permanent, then it is proposed to reallocate the staffing resource to playground management. This would mean a change to the employee's contract, however the financial impact would be negligible.

There is expected to be a small saving associated with a reduction in overtime required to cover weekends, bank holidays and staff absence. The reduction of overtime hours would provide an

estimated revenue saving for Neighbourhood Services of £5000 per annum, based on costs from the 2023/24 financial year.

The only costs associated with the pilot would be from the installation of dropped bollards. The bollards are required in some of the parks as the pedestrian and vehicle gates are combined. The estimated cost associated with the installation of all the required bollards is circa £1000. This would be funded from the overtime savings outlined above.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

A first stage impact assessment has been undertaken to assist the Council in discharging its legislative duties (under the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

The first stage assessment as provided in Appendix B has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required at this time. This position will need to be revisited if a future decision is taken to make permanent changes.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

The proposed policy would apply to the Council's parks & gardens located in valley communities as with other areas.

Workforce Impacts:

Changes to how we manage our parks and gardens would have a positive impact on operational staff, as it would remove the risks associated with lone working and improve our resource within other areas to deliver efficient and well maintained service provision.

Legal Impacts:

People in our parks outside the opening hours will breach the Council's Byelaws; however, unless unlawful act(s), behaviour(s) or conduct has occurred, the Council will not commence enforcement action. The Council has no legal duty to keep its parks physically locked at night.

Per s.17 Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Council must consider crime and disorder, and anti-social behaviour in the discharge of all its functions.

Under the Occupiers' Liability Act 1984, the Council has a duty of care. It must take reasonable care to minimise danger to prevent the risk of injury and/or harm to those entering our parks, including trespassers. Subsequent to the pilot, the Council will undertake a risk assessment to identify any additional risks presented by leaving the parks unlocked at night and whether any steps are needed to mitigate such risks.

The recommendations contained in this report are within the Council's powers and duties.

Risk Management Impacts:

Adopting the recommendations would minimise the risk to staff safety and associated issues posed by lone working. The period of time during the summer months where certain parks and gardens were not locked on a regular basis overnight suggests that there would be negligible adverse impact in terms of anti-social behaviour.

Crime and Disorder Impacts:

As set out in the Background section of this report, it is envisaged that the initiative, if implemented permanently, would reduce the risk to staff who are attending parks alone at night. There has been a rising number of issues in recent years, resulting in staff being exposed to verbal abuse and physical threats whilst asking members of the public to leave the parks at closure.

It has also been suggested that by leaving parks open to the general public, it will allow the parks to be self-policed. Members of the general public who use the parks out of hours will naturally deter incidents of anti-social behaviour.

During the period of time throughout the summer where the parks could not be closed, there were no negative impacts. However, an official pilot will enable officers to gain a further understanding of any negative impacts that may occur from this initiative such as drug misuse, sex work, anti-social behaviour within our parks. Officers will work closely with the Community Safety Partnership Board during the pilot and work to identify any measures that would need to be considered if this initiative were to be made permanent in the future.

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item as the proposal is only to undertake a trial in order to establish any unforeseen impacts. Feedback from local Members would be sort as part of the pilot.

Recommendations:

Having had due regard to the first stage Integrated Impact Assessment, it is recommended that Members:

- Endorse the proposal to carry out an official pilot to not restrict pedestrian access to the parks and gardens listed in Appendix A for a period of 4 months commencing 1st December 2024, the outcome of the pilot to be reported back.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

- To help ensure the Council fulfils its Duty of Care with respect to staff safety in relation to lone working.
- To establish any unforeseen impacts that the proposed changes to the service will have.

Implementation of Decision:

The decision is proposed for implementation after the three day call in period.

Appendices:

Appendix A – List of Parks & Gardens covered by this report
Appendix B - First Stage Integrated Impact Assessment

List of Background Papers:

None

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