



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

21st May 2025

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: Changes in Access Approach to Parks and Gardens

Purpose of the Report:

To consider and implement a public consultation to further evidence permanent changes in the approach taken to open and close parks and gardens.

Executive Summary:

The Neighbourhood Services team has conducted an official trial of a change in approach to the opening and closing of our formal parks and gardens. Throughout the county borough, parks and gardens are opened and closed daily, limiting out of hours access. Throughout the period of 1st December 2024 – 1st April 2025, a trial was conducted to review the impacts of allowing pedestrian access gates on all parks and gardens to always remain open. After review of the feedback received during this period, it would be proposed that the Council embark on a full public consultation, to gather further evidence to inform a permanent decision.

Further consultation with relevant stakeholders will allow us to fully understand all potential issues and benefits that could result from permanent implementation. The proposed change includes pedestrian access gates always remaining open, with vehicle access gates remaining secured outside of opening hours. Dependent on the outcome of the consultation, a further report will be brought before cabinet including a recommendation in relation to the ongoing opening and closing operations to our parks and gardens.

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 summer of 2024, there were several parks and gardens across the borough that frequently remained open. During this 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. This led to the implementation of an official trial, to further test the proposed operational change, which took place during the period 1st December 2024 – 1st April 2025.

Prior to the commencement of this trial, relevant stakeholder groups were informed of the proposed changes and asked to engage and provide feedback throughout the trial period. A full list of all consulted stakeholders can be found in Appendix C.

Additional stakeholder groups were consulted through liaison with the local Police force to obtain further evidence and understanding of the impacts of the change. Officers of the Streetcare section attended two 'Safer NPT Community Safety Partnership' meetings, where feedback on the trial was obtained. One of the meetings was held during December 2024, just after the trial had commenced and the other on 11th March 2025, three weeks prior to the end of the trial.

Feedback obtained from these meetings was minimal, with no increase in anti-social behaviour or criminal activity recorded within the time period of 1st December 2024 – 11th March 2025. The only statement noted was in regard to Victoria Gardens. Though no concerns were raised throughout the trial period, this location has historic issues for the police force, which they would like us to consider if there were a permanent implementation of operational changes.

Feedback provided by stakeholders throughout the trial period has been collated and reviewed (Appendix D) and no evidence has been obtained to suggest negative impact would result from the permanent implementation of this operational change.

However, there was an exception to the findings in that of Victoria Gardens. This park received 56% of the correspondence during the trial and identified an increase in dog fouling and litter within the vicinity. During the Safety Community Partnership meeting, the question was raised, asking for feedback on complaints or rises in criminal activity within any of our parks and gardens. No change had been noted during the trial period. However, due to the historic issues and sensitivities surrounding Victoria Gardens, it was suggested that this site was treated in silo and opening and closing operations reverted to normal. After consulting with internal operational staff, this consensus was solidified.

It is proposed that a full public consultation is undertaken to identify all issues and benefits that have occurred throughout the unofficial and official trial periods. This consultation will be carried out in a questionnaire format. It has been recommended that the questionnaire is provided to the following stakeholder groups:

- Residents living in a property that is directly overlooking a park or garden.
- Relevant stakeholder groups who were originally consulted before the commencement of the official trial.
- Park Users. To be communicated via a QR code that will be present in all formal parks and gardens.

Following a consultation, and on review of the feedback, a further report can then be brought before cabinet, including a recommendation in relation to the permanent gate operations moving forward.

Financial Impacts:

It is essential that service delivery models are reviewed periodically to identify if they are providing value for money, especially at such a time where Local Government finances are so thinly stretched. 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 suggested changes are made permanent, then it is proposed to reallocate the staffing resource to playground management and a management of change process will be undertaken in consultation with officers (and any appropriate trade union representatives).

During the trial period, our mobile ranger was provisionally assigned to playground inspections for the entirety of his working week. This has allowed us to implement a new digital system for playground inspections, which has improved defect management, general maintenance and has provided us with a more robust directory of repairs within our playgrounds. Carrying out consistent and thorough inspections will help to identify areas for improvement and provide resilience for larger maintenance tasks whilst enhancing playground safety.

A subsequent small saving associated with a reduction in overtime required to cover weekends, bank holidays and staff absence could be seen. 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.

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. This assessment was undertaken prior to undertaking the official pilot of not locking the parks at night. The consultation process which we are seeking permission to undertake will form part of a full impact assessment required to inform a decision on whether to make the change of access arrangements permanent.

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, the impacts of which can be seen below.

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. The Council will undertake risk assessments to identify any additional risks presented by leaving the parks unlocked at night and whether any steps are needed to mitigate such risks.

Risk Management Impacts:

Adopting the recommendations would minimise the risk to staff safety and associated issues posed by lone working. The evidence obtained throughout the trial period, whereby parks and gardens were not locked 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 public, it will allow the parks to be self-policed. Members of the public who use the parks out of hours will naturally deter incidents of anti-social behaviour.

During the official trial period there were no recorded impacts to the community in relation to antisocial behaviour. Stakeholder groups on

the Community Safety Partnership board were consulted, but no increase in criminal activity was recorded.

Consultation:

It is proposed that a full public consultation is undertaken to identify all issues and benefits that have occurred throughout the unofficial and official trial periods. This consultation will be carried out in a questionnaire format. It has been recommended that the questionnaire is provided to the following stakeholder groups:

- Residents living in a property that directly overlooks a park or garden.
- Relevant stakeholder groups who were originally consulted before the commencement of the official trial.
- Park Users. To be communicated via a QR code that will be present in all formal parks and gardens.

Following the consultation, and on review of the feedback, a further report can then be brought before cabinet, including a recommendation in relation to the permanent gate operations moving forward.

Recommendations:

Having had due regard to the first stage Integrated Impact Assessment undertaken prior to the official pilot, it is recommended that the Head of Streetcare be authorised, in conjunction with corporate communications, to carry out a further full public consultation exercise to obtain a wider understanding of the potential issues that could occur from permanent implementation of changes to park opening and closing operations, and that a further report detailing the results of the consultation be brought back to Cabinet with any final proposals.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

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 – List of Consulted stakeholder groups, prior to official trial.

Appendix C – Evidence and feedback gathered throughout official trial period.

Appendix D – List of addresses to be directly contacted as part of the wider consultation.

Appendix E – Proposed Consultation Survey

List of Background Papers:

- Cabinet Report – Pilot of Access Arrangements for Parks and Gardens – 13th November 2024.

Officer Contact:

Name: James Davies

Designation: Neighbourhood Services Manager

Email: j.davies19@npt.gov.uk

Direct dial: 01639 686408