

**ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY REGENERATION SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF TRANSFORMATION

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19th JUNE 2014

SECTION A – FOR INFORMATION

WARD(S) AFFECTED: MARGAM

MARGAM COUNTY PARK

Purpose of report

To provide Members with an update on the capital and revenue developments within Margam Country Park.

Background

Margam Park is a remarkably diverse and varied landscape within which there is evidence of over 4,000 years of continuous habitation and use by man. The Park is set in over 850 acres of parkland and is a site of outstanding historical importance including the Tudor-Gothic style Victorian Mansion House. The historic core includes Cistercian Abbey remains and 18th and 19th Century garden and landscaping phases. Of particular importance are the banqueting house façade (the Temple of the Four Seasons), the 18th Century Orangery, the Citrus House and the 19th Century gardens.

The Park is a multi faceted visitor attraction with well established deer herd, narrow gauge railway, a children's adventure playground and extensive play area and a well stocked farm trail.

Margam Country Park's purpose is encapsulated in the Parks vision

...to create a sustainable flagship facility that celebrates the synergy between heritage and the natural environment in a stimulating fusion of education and entertainment , in a unique, inspiring, historic setting, establishing Margam as an environmental education centre and a high quality cultural and leisure destination of national status and significance...

The Council has developed an outline Master Plan for Margam Country Park in order to maximize any funding opportunities that could arise, to maximize its

current resources whilst responding to the significant challenges of a reducing revenue situation.

This approach has led to significant changes and improvements within the Park and has expanded the Park's customer and client base beyond what it has traditionally experienced.

The changes have also been recognised by awarding bodies in the countryside and tourism sector with the Park receiving the Green Flag Award for the first time in 2013 which it retained in 2014. In 2013 it was also voted the UK's favourite Park by members of the public in the People's Choice Awards and in 2014 it was voted third overall in the UK and first in Wales.

Key statistics

Visitor numbers for the past three years have grown significantly from 180,954 in 2012-13, 220,963 in 2013-14 to 269,827 in 2014-15.

Financial management

Managing a complex and multi faceted facility such as Margam requires close financial regulation to ensure that income is maximised whilst expenditure is controlled. The variability of the weather makes this process even more complicated as it affects income as well as expenditure levels on a daily basis.

The Park's main source of income is the Car Parking fees with the resultant secondary spend aspect, such as the Park's shop, essential as well. The Park has also diversified its secondary income offer by hiring out meeting rooms (this also attracts a new client base to the park), outdoor activities, special events and filming.

Until January 2015, the Park was not responsible for the Orangery and currently is not responsible for Charlotte's Pantry in the Park's Courtyard.

The financial figures for the past three years are depicted below with the 2014/15 figures excluding Charlotte's Pantry, Orangery and the HLF project as well as one off costs, such as playground refurbishments, and are provisional and subject to Audit.

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Total Income	400,568	476,528	542,158
Total Net Expenditure	542,519	453,948	558,681

The Forward Financial Plan has had significant impact on the operation of the Park with a reduction of £150,000 in the core budget for 2015/16. This saving

has been achieved by efficiencies and reductions in the expenditure budget as well as three experienced staff members of staff leaving through voluntary redundancy.

Both Park management and staff are identifying and adopting new and more flexible methods of working, particularly in the area of grounds and estate maintenance. Despite this, visitor numbers to the Park have held up well at the start of 2015 / 2016 however there is no doubt that this is presenting operational challenges.

Key Developments

Historic Core

The Council was successful in its application to the Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People programme in December 2012. This was to conserve and enhance the Historic Core of the Park (circa 1902) with a view to increasing the usage of the Park, raising public awareness of its heritage value, providing opportunities for learning and volunteering and improving future management and maintenance. The total project cost for the Historic Core was £2,063,801, with £1,600,000 from HLF matched with £218,210 of ERDF funding and £245,591 from the Council.

The works were completed in early summer 2014 and were delivered as a successful partnership between Margam Country Park and the Environment Directorate. The quality of the restoration will enable the physical attributes of structures such as the Pierced Screen on the north terrace walls and the Broadwalk steps to be enjoyed by generations to come.

The HLF funding is also supporting, for a five year period, the plans to improve and enhance the management and maintenance of the Park, training, audience development and a volunteer development programme. The Park has employed a Head Gardener, Assistant Gardener and Volunteer Co-Ordinator to help implement these plans.

The Volunteering aspect of the programme is essential to the longevity of the Historic Core and is helping the Park Management cope with the reduction in the core budget. To date, the Park has received over 190 enquiries from potential volunteers and currently have 20 active volunteers.

The Council is currently working with colleagues in the Environment Directorate to develop a “Phase Two” bid to the HLF which, if successful, would enable the Park to carry out further essential capital works to conserve Margam Castle and other structures within the Historic Core.

Citrus House & Abbey Ruins

Following the restoration of the 200-year-old Citrus House, £230,000 was secured from WREN (£75,000), Cadw (£750) and the Rural Development Plan (£154,250) to carry out works to stabilise the twelfth century Abbey ruins which are a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Surveys revealed that both structures were in a poor condition and in danger of collapse. This work has now been completed again to a high standard.

Margam Activities Centre

The Park has an excellent track record in delivering outdoor activities and events to a wide range of user groups including local schools, the youth service, social services and visitors to the Discovery Centre. Participants have the opportunity to take part in canoeing / kayaking, mountain biking, stand up paddle boarding and archery. 217 sessions were delivered in 2014 to 2,345 participants.

The Park works in partnership with the Council's Physical Activity and Sport Service and this programme significantly contributes to the Council's objective of getting young people more physically active. For example, the Afan Tawe Nedd Schools Cross Country events now take place within the Park linked to Welsh Athletics.

The Council has also continued to work closely with the Welsh Government, Welsh Cycling and British Cycling to attract major Mountain Biking events to Margam utilising the 4.5km Championship course that has been constructed in the Park, again utilising European funding (Cognition).

Caravan & Camping Site

For some time negotiations have been progressing with The Caravan and Camping Club with regard to establishing a 91 pitch camping and caravan site at the East end of the Park. It is currently estimated that construction works will commence in autumn 2015 with a view to the site being open from Easter 2016. This will bring additional, new visitors to the Park and to Neath Port Talbot. From the Park's point of view it will generate a rental income and provide the opportunity to increase secondary spend.

Play Facilities

A significant proportion of Park visitors are families with young children therefore it is important to provide appropriate play facilities within the Park. The highly popular adventure playground within the Park was showing significant signs of wear and tear. This has been completely refurbished at a cost of £25,000 and once again is proving popular.

Excellent use has been made of the Increasing Play Opportunities for Children grant from Welsh Government. In 2014/15, four projects were completed including the installation of a Wood Vibrations Trail using timber from the Park, an adventure trail in the children's fairytale village, with bridges, rope walks, silt walks, zig zag beams, creating a more challenging play experience, enhancements to the adventure playground at Margam Park to encourage free play and, for the younger children, a living willow cathedral has been planted in that area.

Filming and media

The Park has been successful in developing longstanding partnerships with private sector film companies to use the Castle and the Park as a location. This has included the 10 episode series Da Vinci's Demons, a Stars TV production in conjunction with BBC for worldwide broadcast, a major Bollywood film with Mr Amitabh Bachchan again for worldwide Broadcast and the Bastard Executioner produced by TCFTV Ltd.

Not only does this provide an additional source of income for the Park but it also provides a wider economic impact to the local area.

The partnership with the BBC, S4C and ITV has been developed with a wide variety of programmes being regularly filmed within the Park including Countryfile, Dr Who, Ffermio, CBBC, Coast and Country and Weatherman Walking. Work has also been carried out with our colleagues in Economic Development to promote the Park more widely as a filming venue. Evidence of this is coming to fruition with the ITV filming their successful Flog It programme in the Park.

The Park makes extensive use of social media including both Twitter and Facebook. The Park's Facebook account currently has 12,377 likes. In addition to this, the Park has developed an App specifically for visitors.

Events

The Park has changed its focus from organising large scale events, with the inherent risks associated with doing so, to focusing on providing a daily school holiday activity programme. This has been well received by visitors. The Park also organises small events designed to appeal to a family audience on Bank Holidays and continues to deliver the ever popular Santa deer feeds.

The Park works closely with third party event organisers who wish to put on events in the Park. This strategy is successful on many levels and provides excellent publicity for the Park as well as contributing significantly to our income. These events include the National Mountain Bike series race, Mini

Burn adventure race, 5km / 10km club and themed runs, Wiggle Dragon Ride, Dogs Trust and Volksfest.

One of the challenges which face the Park going forward is to review the pricing structure for events, in particular those events which hire the whole of the Park. During the last two years in particular the Park has become increasingly busy at weekends, generating significant income which potentially could be greater than the income derived from hiring out the park to a third party event organiser.

Voluntary Sector Partnerships

The Park has built strong partnerships with its resident Sports Clubs namely Margam Cricket Club, Margam Angling Club and Margam Archers. The Field Studies Council based at the Margam Discovery Centre continues to be an important partner for the Park delivering environmental education for schools with the Park providing outdoor adventurous activities for residents.

The Orangery

The Park has recently taken over management responsibility for the Orangery and steps have been taken to develop the commercial opportunities that this presents. This has included a review of the charging structure for the Orangery, the development of mid-week bookings, events and re-negotiating costs with suppliers.

Key developments for the Orangery have been:

- The launch of a new web site with revamped branding linked to a newly commissioned wedding brochure, glassware and staff uniform to match the website. New users and targets for face book and twitter.
- Revised menus and Special Packages to compete in the sector.
- Investment in a state of the art oven reducing wastage on meats whilst dramatically reducing cooking times and staffing costs. Kitchen equipment from Port Talbot Civic Centre has been utilised to upgrade The Orangery equipment.
- Retained 5* Environmental Health rating.
- New bar cooler system to improve the quality of the products.
- Efficiencies from changed bar supplier / products to reflect the quality of the venue and food introducing brands such as Lauren Perrier and Peroni. New Wine and branded glasses for all products.
- Addressed spare capacity by attracting new business on a Monday to Friday by promoting a new wider range of booking from 25 delegates up to 300 offering a more flexible venue.

- Completed all outstanding Health and Safety issues whilst finalised agreements with Legal team and Environmental Health regarding third parties.
- New point of sale software, giving detailed sales reports, introduced telephone payments, new booking procedures and new income reconciliation processes
- Reviewed current staffing rotas and introduced new working patterns improving efficiencies.
- New marketing plan based on the new website and branding.
- A review of the current advertising outlets introducing new publications and online marketing.

Diversification

For many years, the Park has been selling venison carcasses to both members of the public and to game dealers. This meat is available as a result of the annual deer cull which has to be carried out for reasons of animal welfare.

In 2014 a grant from Cywain (a Welsh Government initiative designed to encourage diversification and the development of food products) enabled the Park management to explore the opportunities of adding value to the venison. This was done by the introduction of venison boxes for sale to the public and the production of venison sausages and burgers as well as salami.

These new products have been well received – all three varieties of burger won Gold awards at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society’s Winter Fair and the sausages took one Gold and Two Silver awards. Plans are in place to introduce other new produce (such as rare breed pork boxes).

The Park plans to develop its existing shop to sell additional lines of locally produced food and to become an outlet for other local producers to sell their wares. The completion of the caravan and camping site will help to make this viable.

List of Background Papers

Margam Country Park – Acceptance of Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People Round One application.

ECR Margam Country Park Stage G report September 2012

ECR Margam Country Park update report March 2013

Wards Affected

All

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