



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet Board

Wednesday 25th November 2020

**Joint Report of Michael Roberts, Head of Street Care and
Simon Brennan, Head of Property & Regeneration**

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: Neath North, Neath South, Cimla and Tonna.

Gnoll Estate Country Park Masterplan

Purpose of the Report

1. To summarise the outcome of the Gnoll Estate Country Park Masterplan and the opportunities that the plan presents for enhancing the park in line with community feedback.
2. To seek Members' approval to deliver the prioritised visitor experience recommendations this financial year (2020/2021) and the longer term proposals over a period of 3-5 years.
3. To outline options for the delivery of the visitor accommodation elements of the masterplan.
4. To seek Member approval to delegate authority to negotiate the terms of an access agreement with neighbouring landowners The Woodland Trust.

Executive Summary

5. This report summarises the outcome of the Gnoll Estate Country Park Masterplan process which undertook consultation with the local community, local Councillors and relevant stakeholders.

6. The report outlines and prioritises actions within the visitor experience action plan and summarises the proposals for visitor accommodation development.
7. The report seeks approval from Members to enter into an access agreement with The Woodland Trust in relation to their land which borders onto the country park.

Background

8. During 2019 Officers involved in the Management of Gnoll Country Park and the Authority's Tourism Team began discussions around the potential for the development of onsite visitor accommodation at the park, in particular the installation of a caravan/ camping site and the refurbishment of the former Ranger's cottage.
9. Rather than developing accommodation in isolation it was recognised that there was also a need to;
 - 1) Understand the opportunities for investment within the Park which could support visits by existing audiences, in particular the local community; and,
 - 2) Identify additional revenue generation opportunities at the site.
10. Given that the accommodation proposals were likely to require a high level of investment and external grant funding, it was essential that the Authority was able to measure the feasibility and sustainability of the proposals put forward.
11. In late 2019 NPTCBC appointed Planning Solutions Consulting Ltd to undertake an analysis of Gnoll Estate Country Park to assess the feasibility of developing on site visitor accommodation within the park and improvements that could be made to the wider visitor experience.
12. As part of this study Planning Solutions were instructed to strike a balance within their recommendations, between ensuring that the park continues to appeal to its current local audience and proposals to attract staying visitors.
13. To inform the master planning process a series of consultation exercises were undertaken in January 2020 as follows;
 - An online survey of existing visitors and the local community. The purpose of the survey was to understand motivations for visiting

the park and obtain views on how the park can be improved. This survey received **818 responses** and the findings have formed the basis of the Visitor Experience Action Plan (**please refer to Appendix 1**).

- A workshop with park staff
- A workshop with The Friends of Gnoll Country Park and wider stakeholders such as The Woodland Trust.
- A workshop with NPTCBC relevant Cabinet Members and local Councillors whose wards include or border on the park.

14. Due to NPTCBC staff resources being directed towards Covid-19 efforts the overall completion of the masterplan was delayed until post summer 2020, however Planning Solutions Consulting Ltd carried on with their research and analysis throughout this period.

15. **Visitor Experience Action Plan**

16. As stated above; due to the high level of engagement by the local community and visitors through the online survey, in addition to the feedback obtained during the consultation workshop, it has been possible to devise a robust action plan (**please refer to Appendix 1**) to address specific issues and developments relating to;

- Enhancing the Sense of Welcome and Car Parking
- Catering Offer
- Interpretation
- Play and Adventure Activities
- Events
- Marketing
- Other activities (i.e. additional proposals that can add value).

17. Whilst some of the actions contained within the action plan can be delivered relatively quickly, there are some, such as; addressing limited staffing resources, seeking funds for marketing activities and high cost developments such as café refurbishment etc., that will need further consideration and identification of funding to deliver.

18. There is an allocation of £50,000 set against delivery of elements of the Gnoll Country Park Masterplan within the NPTCBC Capital Programme.

19. Officers have discussed the prioritisation of actions which are deliverable within the time frame remaining to allocate the funds and

it is recommended that the following are taken forward for delivery by 31st March 2021;

- 19.1 Signage at entrance points and pay points explaining how car parking costs are reinvested into the park. The aim of this action is to enable visitors to the park to understand how the car parking fees help to sustain the park for their enjoyment.
 - 19.2 Interpretation panels throughout the park which highlight key features and historical assets which will enable visitors to better understand the context of the park.
 - 19.3 In readiness for the summer season agree locations and construct BBQ points.
 - 19.4 Install additional seating/picnic benches at new vantage points within the park.
 - 19.5 Enhance/create walking routes by installing way markers and producing electronic PDFs of the walks so that they can be downloaded from the Gnoll Country Park website. As part of this Officers would also seek to create a designated running trail.
 - 19.6 Rebrand of Café to include a revised (locally/ Welsh relevant) menu and enhance overall quality by installing new signage and branded clothing for staff. Officers will seek funds for the longer term refurbishment of the café/ internal spaces within the centre.
 - 19.7 Subject to budget and space available, consider additional playground equipment within the adventure playground in order to refresh the offer and maintain interest in the facility.
20. In order to maintain momentum and deliver on the longer term actions set out within **Appendix 1**, it is proposed that an Officer working group is formed to work alongside The Friends of Gnoll Country Park and The Woodland Trust (as key deliver partners) to address the remaining actions over a 3-5 year period. It is proposed that this group then reports annually to Board to update on progress.
21. The Visitor Experience Action Plan is intended as a 'working document' which will be regularly amended to reflect emerging opportunities and priorities over the next 3 – 5 years. For example,

the masterplan does not currently include detailed actions around conserving and enhancing biodiversity at Gnoll Estate Country Park which is noted as a key priority for respondents of the online survey, the Officer Working Group will ensure that biodiversity actions (and other priorities) are taken forward within the action plan.

22. **Visitor Accommodation Proposals**

23. The masterplan undertakes a detailed analysis of the potential visitor accommodation development opportunities at Gnoll Estate Country Park, specifically at the location of the former service yard which is situated behind the former Ranger's Cottage. **The full Gnoll Estate Country Park Master Plan document can be found in Appendix 2.**
24. Although the original proposal related to the feasibility of a caravan/ camping site and the refurbishment of the Ranger's Cottage for holiday accommodation, the masterplan took a pragmatic approach by undertaking an analysis of a wide range of accommodation types in order to find a fit which is right for the park.
25. In order to establish the feasibility of developing on site visitor accommodation the masterplan outlines the findings of comprehensive research relating to;
- Drive time profiles (population within 180 minute drive time of the park)
 - Demographics within the stated drive times
 - Competitor landscape – to understand over or under supply of specific accommodation types nearby and country park/ forestry recreation sites within an approximate 10 mile radius.
 - Average annual accommodation occupancy rates for different types of accommodation in Wales
 - Emerging trends within the accommodation sector and case studies relating to accommodation development at similar attractions.
26. From this research the masterplan undertakes a scored assessment of the accommodation developments which offer the greatest potential for Gnoll Estate Country Park.
27. The weighted scoring matrix which is shown in **Figure 1: Accommodation Options Scoring Matrix**, scores each option

against a set of specific criteria with scores ranging from 1 to 10 (with 10 being the maximum awarded).

28. The scoring matrix prioritises two key opportunities for the establishment of visitor accommodation at Gnoll Estate Country Park;
 - 1) Refurbishment of the former Ranger's Cottage to create a high quality holiday cottage.
 - 2) The introduction of a cluster of 12 high quality wooden camping pods inclusive of ensuite bathroom facilities.
29. **Figure 2** illustrates the potential site layout for the proposals above.

Figure 1: Accommodation Options Scoring Matrix

Uses / products	Site fit		Market considerations			Deliverability		Financial and operational considerations			Total weighted score
	Fit with development site	Synergy with the 'landscape' / environment of Gnoll Estate Country Park	Potential to attract specific target market segments	Seasonality (potential to generate year round occupancy)	Step change in profile of Gnoll Estate Country Park	How complex will the option to be deliver?*	Risk*	Indicative capital cost*	Economic impact	Level of additional staff resource*	
Weighting	2.0	1.5	2.0	2.0	2.5	2.5	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.0	
Conversion of former Ranger's cottage	9.0	9.0	8.0	8.0	4.0	8.0	6.0	9.0	5.0	9.0	142.5
Cluster of seasonal yurts or other temporary 'glamping' structures such as pods or wooden pods	8.0	8.0	7.0	4.0	6.0	8.0	7.0	8.0	5.0	6.0	131.0
One-off design led intervention	5.0	7.0	8.0	8.0	7.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	5.0	6.0	124.5
Conversion of existing buildings (former potting sheds) on site to bunkhouse type of	9.0	9.0	6.0	5.0	4.0	7.0	6.0	8.0	3.0	8.0	123.0
Seasonal camping field	6.0	7.0	7.0	3.0	4.0	9.0	8.0	9.0	4.0	5.0	122.0
Floating structures	1.0	6.0	8.0	7.0	7.0	3.0	5.0	7.0	5.0	6.0	106.0
Cluster of high-quality self-catering lodges	4.0	6.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	9.0	3.0	105.0
Touring park site	4.0	5.0	8.0	4.0	6.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	7.0	3.0	93.0

* Within this category a low score represents a negative outcome

Figure 2: Illustration of proposed layout of accommodation



30. The Masterplan document outlines the costs and operating models for the proposed accommodation and officers are keen to move forward with these proposals. However, due to the significant ongoing impact of Covid 19 the likelihood of sourcing external funding in the near future to develop these proposals is decreasing. In addition to this the ability of the Council to prioritise funding for these proposals at this time may be unrealistic.
31. There is likely to be significant ongoing demand for UK domestic breaks in the long term and the location of the proposed accommodation may attract interest from private sector holiday accommodation developers.
32. In order to establish a delivery model for accommodation provision at Gnoll Estate Country Park it is proposed that officers;
 - 1) Undertake a comprehensive search for suitable external funding (including establishing the likelihood of post Covid-19 funding streams) which could enable a development of this nature to be delivered by the Authority
 - 2) Examine the potential 'in principle' demand from the private sector for taking the proposals forward by undertaking an Expression of Interest exercise
 - 3) Report to Board on the findings of the above exercises to agree a model for delivery of visitor accommodation at Gnoll Estate Country Park.
33. **Access Agreement with The Woodland Trust**
34. In 2019 The Woodland Trust purchased approximately 95 ha (235 acres) of land which borders onto Gnoll Estate Country Park.
35. Officers were given approval by Members to enter into discussions with The Woodland Trust in relation to joint working and reciprocal access for visitors.
36. Creating physical linkages, including a pathway and construction of a footbridge, between Gnoll Estate Country Park and The Woodland Trust site will raise the profile of the park whilst enabling visitors to enjoy a much larger area of land for recreation. This will in turn enhance the visitor experience and increase dwell time. The access structures will fully remain the responsibility of the Woodland Trust, this to include maintenance and liability matters.

37. The Woodland Trust is not proposing to create on site car parking on their land for use by its members and is seeking to enable its visitors to utilise parking available at the Gnoll Estate Country Park car park.
38. Whilst increased usage of the existing car park will have clear benefits it could also create additional pressures at busy periods, whereby the car parking provision throughout the park regularly reaches capacity on peak days. In order to address this officers are currently in discussion with The Woodland Trust regarding future potential investment for increasing car parking provision to manage visitor flows.
39. A plan indicating the scale and location of The Woodland Trust land and its proximity to Gnoll Estate Country Park can be found in **Appendix 3.**

Financial Impacts

40. There is already an allocation of £50,000 within the Council's capital programme to deliver improvements linked to the Gnoll Estate Country Park Masterplan this financial year (2020/2021).
41. The longer term and/ or larger scale improvements identified will require external grant funding and Officers will seek these opportunities out where possible.
42. There is likely to be a match funding requirement against any future grant funding applications and where this arises separate reports will be submitted to Board for approval.
43. Discussions are taking place with The Woodland Trust in relation to a potential contribution towards maintenance costs of the approaching access path.

Integrated Impact Assessment

44. 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 has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required.

Valleys Communities Impacts

45 None

Workforce Impacts

46 None.

Legal Impacts

47 None

Risk Management Impacts

48 None.

Consultation

49 As part of the master planning process a survey was undertaken of the local community/ existing visitors which received 818 responses, this feedback is reflected in the visitor experience action plan (**Appendix 1**).

50 In addition to the above a series of workshops were held with local members and park staff to seek their views on how the park should develop. The workshops were also attended by The Friends of Gnoll Country Park and The Woodland Trust.

Recommendations

51 That Members agree the prioritised visitor experience action plan projects for delivery by 31st March 2021 (as noted in paragraphs 19.1 to 19.2) and the formation of an officer working group to liaise with key partners on the delivery of the remaining actions within the visitor experience action plan over a 3-5 year period.

52 That Members grant approval to enable Officers to undertake further research into available funding streams for the proposed development of on-site visitor accommodation in addition to undertaking an expression of interest exercise with the private sector. The findings of these exercises will then be reported back to Members so that a delivery model can be agreed.

- 53 That delegated authority be granted to the Head of Streetcare and the Head of Property and Regeneration in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member to negotiate the terms of an access agreement with The Woodland Trust to enable reciprocal access for visitors.

Reasons for Proposed Decision

- 54 The proposed recommendations will facilitate the enhancement of facilities and access within Gnoll Estate Country Park, enabling the park to continue to attract a local audience whilst also increasing its contribution to the visitor economy through the development of onsite visitor accommodation.

Implementation of Decision

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

Appendices

- 56 Appendix 1 – Visitor Experience Action Plan
57 Appendix 2 – Gnoll Estate Country Park Visitor Experience and Accommodation Masterplan
58 Appendix 3– Woodland Trust Location Plan.
59 Appendix 4– IIA Screening Form.

List of Background Papers

Officer Contact

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