

Gnoll Estate Country Park: Visitor experience development action plan

Whilst the focus of the work is on assessing the feasibility of introducing visitor accommodation at Gnoll Estate Country Park, we recognise that there is a need to enhance the wider offer to meet the needs of overnight guests but also members of the local community. **Please note that this action plan should be read in conjunction with the full report (Gnoll Estate Country Park Accommodation Masterplan Final Report), which provides the wider background context (stakeholder research, full primary research and market review).**

Note: The visitor modelling for the adjacent Woodland Trust site has not yet been carried out (it is planned as a future stage of work). Depending on the outcome this could significantly increase the level of throughput generated at Gnoll Estate Country Park which would impact on our recommendations below.

Visitor needs

In the table below we set out the findings from the primary research. Overall, there is a positive outlook in terms of introducing new facilities / enhancing existing facilities to improve the overall offer at Gnoll Estate Country Park. There are several areas where visitors would like to see change or new facilities introduced. For example, this is particularly evident in terms of additional interpretation or improved signage, 52% of respondents felt the provision of additional information on the history of the country park was either a high priority or essential element which could be enhanced.

Facility / service	High priority (%)	Essential (%)	Desirable (%)	Not needed (%)	Would not like to see (%)
New play area	14	11	37	34	4
Sculpture trail	13	6	51	25	5
Play trail	22	11	52	12	3
Indoor play	15	14	32	28	10
Enhance café	21	26	40	12	1
Additional interpretation	6	5	26	48	5
Improved signage	9	8	36	44	3
Dedicated BBQ area	13	10	38	25	15
Outdoor cinema	17	14	40	19	10
Enhanced focus on conservation / environment	32	30	32	6	0
More information on the history of the site / local area	28	24	37	10	1
Rowing boats for hire	20	13	41	15	11
Festivals / events	19	22	36	15	8

In respect of festivals / events respondents were asked to comment on ideas for the type of events. Responses included:

- *“Winter wonderland, food festival, wellness festival...”*
- *“A family concert would be lovely or a big family day out concert fair”*
- *“Music concerts, Christmas lights...”*
- *“Open air theatre...”*
- *“Music, craft festival, environmental issues/raising awareness, making things from junk (sculptures)”*
- *“Regular craft lessons/sessions (which could be hosted in the meeting room)”*
- *“Live bands, open cinema, food & drink markets, more children’s events”*
- *“Events need to be more environmentally based...e.g wood carving etc. I really dislike the funfair”*
- *“Welsh music, something for St David's Day”*

- *“Ghost tours, history tour of site, themed days from 18th century, music festivals, family fun sports day”*
- *“The Margam Park luminate event was a massive hit and sell out at Christmas, maybe we could explore the logistics of replicating a similar event at the Gnoll.”*

However, one respondent commented they *“don't want to see themed events spoiling the tranquillity of the area.”*

Other ideas / comments, included:

“I would love to see the park promote camping excursions, small festivals such as Neaths’ Band Fest, which is currently held in pubs in Neath. The addition of boats of the lake would be exciting and appealing to all ages. Previously, the Gnoll held ghost tours in the cellars, this held great appeal! It was interesting and fun! The Gnoll holds so much history for Neath. Adding a campsite option will bring people to the town, it will need to be manned to avoid teenagers but Clyne Gardens and Langors Lake, Brecon have done it so well!”

Respondents were asked whether the improvements they selected as either high or essential would make them likely to visit more often. 91% stated they would.

Respondents were also asked what they would **not** like to see introduced at Gnoll Estate Country Park. The answers generated varied responses but a number of comments were raised about car parking charges *“Higher charges for car park. The current price is far too high.”* There are some concerns about the type of events and the noise which is associated with these.

Also, consideration should be given to the impact that enhancing or introducing new facilities could have upon the wildlife / environment and that the country park should not be ‘over commercialised’.

Development action plan

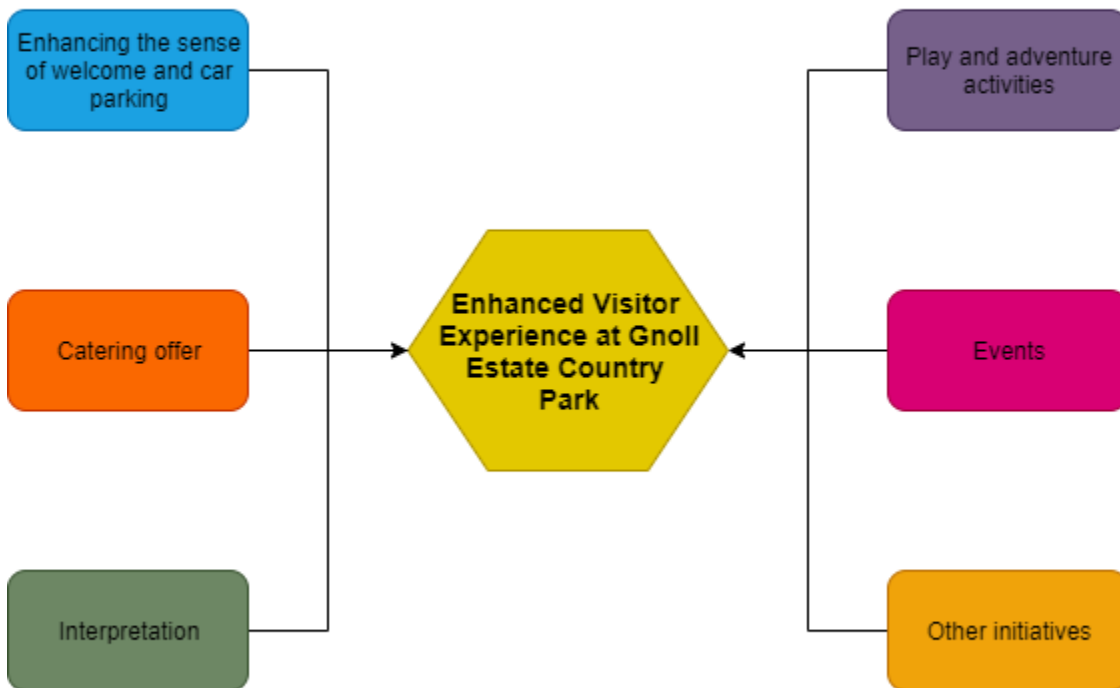
Based upon the drawing the research and consultation together we set below out a range of initiatives in an action plan format to enhance the visitor experience of the wider country park.

These represent a package of initiatives which set out the next steps for Gnoll Estate Country Park.



These have been themed or categorised under the following headings:

Marketing



Resources: Staff and volunteers

It is important to note that there are key guiding principles which provide a framework for developing the action plan:

- Where possible interventions / project should make a positive financial contribution to Gnoll Estate Country Park, but recognising that a number of interventions will not have a 'direct financial impact' but may increase dwelltime and engagement with visitors

- Interventions should respect the qualities that make Gnoll Estate Country Park a special place to visit
- The projects should be targeted at the local communities (it is recognised that visitor accommodation will draw people from further afield)

Health initiatives

At a National and County Borough Level there is a policy drive around encouraging people to become more active to reduce levels of obesity along with improving physical health and mental wellbeing. Country parks and recreation sites have a key role to play in this respect.

It is interesting to look at Moors Valley Country Park which is a hub site used by the Council to encourage people to become more active. 17 weekly health walks of different lengths, these include Nordic Walking, Wellness Walks, Workout Walks which are self-sustaining along with running, cycling (including night cycling and accessible cycling), Mindfulness in Nature, Summer Evening Yoga and Fitness Buggy Workouts.

Subject to seed funding this initiative could be introduced at Gnoll Estate Country Park. Alongside health and wellbeing outcomes there are financial benefits in respect of direct spend on car parking and within the café.

Indicative cost

We have allocated an indicative cost to all initiatives using the scale above. Please note all costs are subject to review by a QS, site survey and they do not take into account services or professional fees or Council staff time or any additional services required. All figures are net of VAT.

- £ <£1,000
- ££ - £1,001 to £10,000
- £££ - £10,001 to £25,000
- ££££ - £25,001 to £50,000
- £££££ - £50,001 to £100,000
- ££££££ - £100,000+

Impact and priority

The impact on the visitor experience and financial position (direct income) along with the priority of the project are set out as Low, Medium and High.

Resources

www.pslplan.co.uk

The initiatives have a resource implication in terms of delivering the project and this is highlighted in the action plan (this does not cover the operational phase – please see commentary below).

Enhancing the sense of welcome and car parking

Enhancing the sense of welcome and car parking						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Introduce welcome signage at all vehicle entry points and main pedestrian entry points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance the immediate sense of arrival Create a strong and positive first impression 	£££	M	L	M	L
Incorporate orientation information at key points (entry, car parking and nodes within the country park) highlighting important features of Gnoll Estate Country Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To signpost key elements of the visitor experience to encourage visitors to use / explore specific areas within Gnoll Estate Country Park 	£££	M	L	M	L
Introduce signage at payment points to explain to visitors how the car parking income is used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase acceptance / willingness to pay car parking fee 	££	M	L	H	L

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used to explain future increases in car parking charges Reduces complaints 					
Consider reviewing charging tariffs based on different dwelltime bands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential to increase income generated via car parking Wider acceptance of car parking charges 	£	H	M	H	M
Consider introduction of ANPR system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To minimise leakage and maximise revenue Improve customer experience (paying on exit rather than at start of journey). Reducing queues 	££££/£££££	H	M	M	L
Extend existing hard standing car parking (recognise need to consider any 'claw back' from Ryder Cup funding)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide additional car parking spaces Reduce dependency on good weather to accommodate additional cars during peak periods 	££££££	H	H	H (see first column)	H

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces staff time spent managing the car park during peak periods 					
<p>Introduce car parking tariff on the lower level to have a consistent policy (we recognise that this needs to be handled sensitively). Would also need to consider controlling parking / access on the lower level road leading up to the former Ranger's Cottage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximise revenue generated onsite 	Part of above work package	L	L/M	H	M

PRECEDENT IMAGES



ANPR system introduced within car parks managed at Hampshire County Council's country parks



Attenborough Nature Centre – explaining how the car parking “donation” is used and messaging at Alice Holt Forestry England site

Catering

Improve the quality of the catering offer to maximise spend						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Open up hatch in reception space during peak periods (near main entrance within visitor centre) to serve a selection of drinks, ice-cream, premade sandwiches and snacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce queues during peak periods and relieve pressure on main servery Increase sales / income Could be trialled relatively quickly 	££	H	M	H	L
Redesign of kitchen / servery counter (current facilities are not ideal and impact on the experience / offer). Including investment in equipment Counter would enable food to be displayed in an attractive fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximise revenue Reduce queues / improves throughput Create a more welcoming offer / space 	£££££	H	H	H	H

<p>Redesign menu (including healthy options / daily specials / pre-booked high-teas etc)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting the needs of customers • Help to reposition the café • Increase average spend and use of the café 	<p>Part of above</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>M/H</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>L/M</p>
<p>Market test option to hire out café outside of core opening hours to service functions / social uses e.g. wedding anniversaries, birthdays (not 18th birthdays). Also, opportunity for functions use of meeting space with improved catering offer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximise revenue generated from 'asset' 	<p>££</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>L</p>
<p>Enhance ambiance e.g. picture windows, wood burning stove</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve customer experience, create a more warm / welcoming atmosphere • Taken together this package of initiatives has the potential to improve visits outside of the core season 	<p>££££</p>	<p>M/H</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>M</p>

Trial 'dog friendly' café outside of peak season	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet needs of visitors (25% of respondents to the survey stated walking the dog was the main reason they visit the country park) 	NA	H	L/M	H	L
Introduce weekly barbecue food offer to be run by catering staff during summer period (one evening per week on a trial basis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used to extend opening hours Provides additional revenue Engage with new audiences 	£	M	L	M	L
Refresh internal decor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates strong positive first impression and welcoming atmosphere where people want to spend time 	Part of above package of initiatives	H	L	M	L
Rebrand café as part of 'relaunch' (including signage, menus etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create stronger identity in the market place Key part of 'refreshing' the offer / experience 	££	M	L	H	L (external agency)

We did consider a standalone kiosk but we have been informed that if this was introduced that this would impact negatively on the event organisers business. It is recognised that the Council are investing in the external space immediately outside of the café.

PRECEDENT IMAGES



Queen Elizabeth Country Park: Architectural treatment of the front of the visitor centre and refurbishment of the café space with new menu offer



Wood burning stove at Dinton Pastures Country Park, use of a national dish – Cawl at Gower Heritage Centre and table top map promoting the National Forest at CONKERS

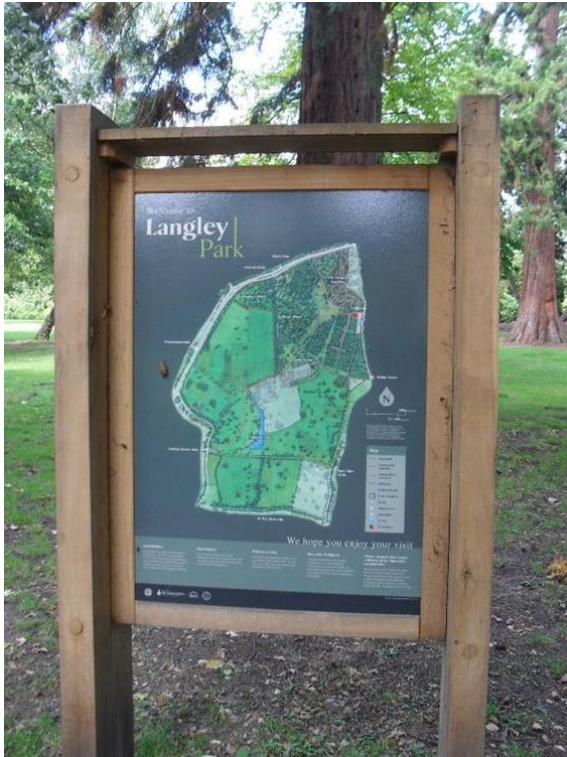
Interpretation

Interpretation – the rich built and natural heritage remains hidden. Explore opportunities to bring this to the forefront of the visitor experience ¹ . The initiatives below would need to be considered as part of a wider interpretation plan						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Develop interpretation plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The aim is to build storytelling into a coherent, distinctive and captivating ‘spirit of place’ 	££/£	M/H	L	M	L (work with external agency)
Introduce stamp boards as part of themed trail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage visitors to explore the wider country park 	££	M	L	M	L
Introduce interpretation within the visitor centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve visitors’ understanding and knowledge about the natural environment and heritage of the country park 	£££	M	L	M	L (external agency)

*Further considerable should be given to introducing a consistence set of signs / use of interpretation and orientation panels in terms of presentation and branding. An opportunity may exist to work closely with the Woodland Trust to develop an integrated approach across both sites given the proximity and opportunity to work together.

¹ It is recognised that the Council has invested in creating a short film which is being streamed in the cafe

PRECEDENT IMAGES



Orientation map at Langley Park and signage at Silent Valley, Gwent Wildlife Trust

Play and adventure activities

The play and activity experience...encouraging repeat visits, increasing dwell-time and providing opportunities for physical activity						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Introduce play trail linking the visitor centre to the Woodland Trust land (the proposed bridge joining the two sites)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage visitors to explore wider country park (rather than staying around the honey pot area) Encourage visitors to explore Woodland Trust site Increase dwelltime and potential for secondary spend 	££££££	H	L	H	M
Assault course challenge (longer term initiative to refresh offer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage repeat visits Generate some corporate use 	££££££	H	L	L	M

Explore opportunities to introduce seasonal pedalos and/or rowing boat hire on the main water body (will need to introduce pontoon and rescue boat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers low cost option for visitors to get on the water • Broadens appeal of the Country Park • Direct income generator 	£££/££££ (excluding pontoon)	M	M	H	M
Way marked routes for runners / walkers (potentially on a temporary basis) – linking routes of differing distances across Gnoll Estate Country Park and adjoining Woodland Trust site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate both sites • Make site specifically more 'attractive' to runners 	£	M	L	M	L (work with Park Run and Woodland Trust)
Refresh play (adjacent to woodland) by introducing new pieces of play equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick win, potentially deliverable prior to Whitsun half-term • Positive PR 	££££	M	L	H	L

PRECEDENT IMAGES



Start of play trail at Moors Valley and swan pedalos at Ferry Meadows

Events (including activities)

Events						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Introduction of major out of season Winter Wonderland experience (<u>would require partner to take forward project</u>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase income (rental to Council and onsite spend) • Create a reason to visit Gnoll Estate Country Park during period of lower throughput (extends the season) • Engage with new audiences 	££	H	M	H	M
Summer outdoor cinema evening programme (<u>would require partner to take forward project</u>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extends onsite operating hours • Generates additional visitor spend • Engages with new audiences/create a new reason to visit 	££	H	L/M	H	M

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low risk to Council if partnership approach adopted 					
<p>Advertise opportunity to event organisers that small-scale events e.g. crafting and talks can be hosted within the visitor centre meeting room and other activities such as bushcrafts within the wider country park (the events/activities would be run by approved third parties)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with new audiences (particularly outside of main season) • Income generation 	£	M	L	M	L

The above options may require an investment from the Council in terms of supporting infrastructure and there is a requirement to develop an events strategy.

PRECEDENT IMAGES



Winter Wonderland at CONKERS (fenced site) – creating a new income stream at Gnoll Estate Country Park (in partnership)

Other initiatives

Other initiatives						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Introduce pre-booked bbq packages (purpose-built BBQs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase revenue generation across the country park 	££	L	L	M	L
Introduction of additional seating to take advantage of key views across lower lake (route around the lake)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves accessibility Encourages people to explore wider country park 	££	M	L	H	L
Dog agility course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directly serves important and rowing dog owner market Creates good feature for regular PR and social media coverage 	££/£££	M	L	M	L
Office letting engage with Woodland Trust to enquire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secures rental income 	£	L	M	H	L

whether they require office space on the upper level of the visitor centre building. But could impact on using lower level of secondary catering outlet (see 9.2.2 above)						
Maintenance of landscape character / features along with paths/trails and repair of some heritage structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve visitor experience • Ensure all paths / trails are usable • Improve the condition for wildlife 	Unknown	H	L	H	H (recognise this would need additional staff resource)
Consider a designated area for a Certificated Location (CL) for up to 5 touring units. Requires secure area but only limited facilities as a minimum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complements proposals for camping pods 	£££	L	M	M	M

PRECEDENT IMAGES



Dog agility area within Queen Elizabeth Country Park



Pre-booked bbq at Alice Holt (permanent bbq with picnic bench)

Marketing

Marketing – without marketing, it will be difficult to attract additional visitors to Gnoll Estate Country Park (particularly important given potential investment to be made into accommodation base)						
Actions	Rationale	Indicative cost	Impact		Priority	Staff resource
			Visitor experience	Financial		
Initial annual programme of customer research, using online service such as SNAP to reduce the costs / staff resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the needs of customers Identify new development opportunities Track/monitor satisfaction levels 	Revenue cost if carried out internally	NA	NA	H	L
Work with agency to develop annual marketing action plan (from Year 2 onwards update in-house)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop strategic approach to marketing and integrate within existing Tourism Team(?) Raise awareness of this hidden 'gem' 	££	NA	NA	H	L (using agency in Year One. Then take in-house)

<p>Employ part-time marketing officer (2 days a week to market the country park). Ensure that person has background in marketing of visitor attractions or similar</p> <p>Consider joint working with Margam Country Park (and / or other tourism assets)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement marketing action plan and to raise the profile of Gnoll Estate Country Park • Increase the number of visits from new users • Increase the number of repeat visits from existing visitors • Leading to increase income generation potential 	Revenue cost	NA	NA	H	H
<p>Introduce system to track annual visitor numbers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop accurate visitor data on number of visitors (help to evaluate offer and investment) 				H	L/M

Resources

it is recognised that the current operation is run on a very lean basis, Councils are being asked to do more with less. With the current staffing structure there is limited capacity to take on new projects, both during the delivery phase and ongoing operational basis. This has also had an impact on the current visitor experience.

During the consultation it was felt as a minimum the ranger team needed an additional permanent member of staff to work between April through to the end of September. The enhanced catering offer will also need additional staff (subject to business planning).

A further consideration is to develop a strong, active and flexible volunteering group who are able to carry out specific physical tasks to support the Ranger team on a project-by-project basis. It is recognised that there is a financial and time resource commitment to develop, manage and train volunteers in specific skill sets. A volunteer system would also reinforce links with the community. A successful example to look at is Paxton Pits Nature Reserve managed by Huntingdonshire District Council.

It will be important to explore partnership working opportunities with the Woodland Trust, particularly in terms of marketing and landscape management.