

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 20<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2025

REFERENCE FROM ENVIRONMENT AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE: 11<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2025

“ LEISURE OPPORTUNITIES AT COUNTRYSIDE SERVICE SITES (REF) – **(Matter which the Chair had decided was urgent by reason of the need to ensure that the Committee could consider the report, and any comments / recommendations made by the Committee could be referred back to Cabinet for consideration, prior to any final agreement with the relevant leisure operators which would be required by 1st April, 2025).**

Cabinet on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2025 had referred the report to Scrutiny Committee for consideration prior to any final agreement with the relevant Leisure operators.

The reference / report was presented to the Committee by the Director of Place, the purpose of which was for Committee to consider the proposed pilot for an on-water aqua leisure activity with a third-party operator on the eastern lake at Cosmeston Country Park, which would build on and supplement existing activities at the location. This was prior to the final negotiations and agreement with the relevant Leisure operators which would be required by 1st April 2025.

The Director of Place summarised the key points of the reference / report as follows:

- The importance of green and blue spaces and in particular the Country Parks at Cosmeston and Porthkerry was recognised by the Council and ensuring the long-term future of these spaces was considered crucial particularly having regard to the experience gained during the recent pandemic and to ensure that such places and the important nature and ecology found within them could be protected for future generations. The changing way that these spaces were used was also recognised with a focus on offering leisure activities to users of the park as well as maintaining the spaces as green areas.
- Recognition that as part of the current placemaking work underway in all four main towns in the Vale of Glamorgan and more specifically, Penarth, summertime leisure activities had been identified as important to users of the park as part of the current consultation exercise.
- The Council had been approached by a leisure operator who would like to explore the opportunity of using part of the eastern lake at Cosmeston Country Park for water-based activities from May 2025 through to September 2025 to test the suitability of the location.
- The report sought approval to negotiate and complete a licence agreement for a maximum term of 20 weeks, through the summer months to pilot the proposal for an aqua leisure use to be operated within the eastern lake at Cosmeston Country park which could provide income to support the

protection and future development of the Country parks with a focus on maintaining green and blue space and nature conservation.

- The request was also made to further explore opportunities for the future use of the medieval village buildings to financially support the continued operation of the country parks.

Following the presentation of the urgent item, several comments and questions were raised at the meeting, which included the following.

Councillor Norman asked what provisions would be in place to protect wildlife during the pilot, due to the abundance of bird species that nested around the area, including Geese and Swans. It was explained that the area was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), including its use by overwintering birds. The Council's Countryside and Ecology services officers had confirmed that summer activities at the location should not impact the existing wildlife there. Also, the Council would require the approval of Natural Resources Wales before the relevant activities could take place. Previously such approval had been granted to operators subject to specific conditions, i.e. the washing of equipment used in local summer activities (such as boats) to ensure no biohazards and alien species could be transferred into the lake and local natural habitats.

The Chair asked what activities would be offered by the operator as part of the proposed pilot. It was explained that these included an on-water assault course, with slides, climbing frames and inflatable equipment situated on the lake within a specific location, to be marked off.

Councillor Ernest raised his concerns on the impact of the proposed activities on Cosmeston Country Park as a whole, including walkers and local wildlife. He also asked about the fees to be charged at the location as a consequence of this pilot and how any potential 'conflict' between the pilot activities and its users, with walkers, other users of the park and local wildlife would be addressed. Regarding the fees, it was explained that the fees would be for the operator of the leisure activities concerned to decide what to charge and therefore not the Council. The Council was in negotiations with the potential operator of the leisure activities to see if the Council could receive an income from siting the leisure activities at the lake. On wildlife protection, the intention was for the area to be used to be marked out and this would be away from the most ecologically important areas. As part of this, there would be a number of conditions as part of the operator's license to ensure that wildlife, the public etc. in the locality were not adversely impacted.

Councillor Penn raised several comments / queries about water quality monitoring at the lake during the trial period, the need for strict enforcement on no access to the western Lake, to encourage the potential operator of these activities to recruit staff locally, i.e. Barry and Penarth, as well as referring to the detail in the report around ongoing Placemaking work in Penarth which had identified that those consulted as part of the process felt there was a lack of leisure opportunities, particularly in the summer period for younger residents and the opportunity to address this by the operator offering lower rates / concessions to young people. In response to these queries / comments, it was explained that the water quality at the location was tested regularly. On restrictions on leisure activities on the western lake, these already existed and would be strictly maintained during the pilot in question, due to the

ecological importance of the western lake. Activities would only be undertaken on the eastern lake in a specified area only. The operator would be focusing on recruiting and training staff locally, which had also been their approach when they had been operating in Cardiff Bay, where they had recruited staff from Penarth, etc. and this would be applied to the proposed site at Cosmeston as well. On concessions, the operator had previously offered these to younger persons both individually and through bodies such as schools in order to use their facilities at reduced group rates, and the expectation was that this would continue at Cosmeston.

Councillor Norman asked about the supervision of the proposed activities at the eastern lake, and whether these would be fully supervised. She also queried whether the staff recruited for this work would be qualified lifeguards / lifesavers. In response, it was explained that both the activities and the site itself would be monitored for both the safety of users and to ensure there was no use of the facilities, the lake or the park after hours. Employees would receive a high level of safety training, including lifesaving skills, which were required by the operator as part of their insurance requirements.

Councillor Protheroe felt this was a positive development but also queried what investment the potential operator for the pilot would be putting into this. She also asked that, following the initial pilot period, whether there would be some kind of open tendering process for the operator and other interested providers for longer term use should the pilot be successful. In addition, she asked for confirmation on whether the relevant due diligence around safety had been undertaken and what the next steps would be following this pilot. In response to these comments and queries, it was explained that the key purpose of the pilot was to see how these activities would work at the location and what the impact would be in terms of both upsides and downsides over the summer season. The intention was that following the pilot period, i.e. in September, a full evaluation and report would be produced in order to see whether it would be appropriate to open for tender for these activities at Cosmeston for another season, with the opportunity to have a longer-term contract and investment in place, for at least ten years, with more permanent facilities, fixtures and fittings being in place. On due diligence, the proposed operator for the pilot already ran three leisure activity facilities, two of these being on lakes and the other at Cardiff Bay, which had all been successful. However, with the Cardiff Bay venture they were looking to relocate to Cosmeston Country Park due to the water quality at the Bay which was limiting access to activities for users. This had in turn provided the Council with an opportunity to assess, test and pilot the impact of such activities at Cosmeston and, if appropriate, the opportunity to bid for the longer-term tender would be offered to both the operator and other providers.

Councillor Hooper reiterated the need for due diligence on this proposal and on the operator, as well as the need to address the appropriateness and suitability of the location to having such activities being undertaken there. He also referred to the text in the report about funding opportunities around this pilot, and whether these were substantial and if they had been included in the Council's budget which had recently been signed off, as well as the reason for the report and proposal coming to Committee now. It was explained that the pilot would help to test the appropriateness of these activities at the park, it being noted that the proposed operator for the pilot had run these activities at similar sites successfully. On funding

opportunities, these would be impacted due to the short notice of the provider moving to Cosmeston and so such funding, other financial benefits and income opportunities would come, and be more effective and beneficial, in the longer term, should the pilot prove successful, and these would help support the park.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Sustainable Places sought to reassure the Committee about the proposals and pilot, with discussions being held with the park's team and the operator to protect the lakes, park, other users and the wider ecology of the area as part of this proposal and to minimise the impact of the activities and facilities on these. It was also important, however, to look at the benefits of expanding access and activities for leisure, particularly for younger people, following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a safe and controlled environment with a proven operator to implement and supervise these activities. Following the 20-week pilot, a report would go back to Cabinet and Scrutiny to assess and to allow for discussion of the pilot.

There being no further comments or questions, and after considering the reference and report, the Committee subsequently

**RECOMMENDED – T H A T**, following consideration of the report, the Committee refer the following comments back to Cabinet for their consideration prior to any final agreement with the relevant leisure operators:

- As part of the final agreement, consideration be given to no access to the western lake at Cosmeston Country Park being enforced with regard to leisure activities;
- Every step be taken to protect the ecological diversity and wildlife at Cosmeston Country Park;
- The Committee welcomed and encouraged the proposed leisure operator's intention to create and recruit for jobs locally as part of this pilot scheme and period;
- The Committee asked that affordability be considered as a key part of the discussions with the provider and that further consideration be given to offering concessions to appropriate users of the leisure activities proposed;
- It was important that a balance was maintained between the proposed leisure activities and those that were already being undertaken and enjoyed by users of the park, as much as possible;
- The Council should ensure that the appropriate due diligence, adequate supervision, training and security were undertaken and provided as part of the agreement with the provider and their operation of leisure activities at this location during the pilot.

#### Reason for recommendation

To ensure that the Committee's comments were referred back to Cabinet for their consideration prior to, and as part of, any final agreement with the relevant leisure operators which would be required by 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2025."