



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

16TH OCTOBER 2018

INVESTMENT UPDATE – LEISURE, PARKS, PLAY AREAS, HERITAGE AND VISITOR ATTRACTIONS

REPORT OF DIRECTOR, PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, LEISURE AND HERITAGE, COUNCILLOR A. CRIMMINGS

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Cabinet on the progress of the investment programme into Leisure Centres, 3G Pitches, Play Areas, Parks and Heritage and Visitor Attractions, highlighting the improvements in service performance as direct result of the investment

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that cabinet:

- 2.1 Note the progress made with the investment programme into Leisure, Sport, Parks, Play and Visitor Attractions across the County Borough,
- 2.2 Recognise the significant improvements in service delivery that are a direct result of the investment programme, and
- 2.3 As funding opportunities arise, consider future investment priorities for the service.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Council has embarked on an ambitious programme of investment into the facilities and infrastructure of the County Borough.
- 3.2 The investments into the Council's Leisure Centres were a direct result of the Leisure Strategy, which was adopted by the Council in 2016. The Strategy set out a plan to increase physical activity levels and contribute to the Health and Wellbeing Agenda as well as securing a sustainable future for the Council's Leisure Centres.

- 3.3 The Council, in partnership with 21st Century Schools and Sport Wales has made a major investment into new 3G facilities in both public and school sites. The Council is committed to ensuring that these facilities are accessible to all parts of the County Borough.
- 3.4 2018/19 is the third year of the investment programme into children's play areas. There are 200+ children's play areas in RCT, many of which were in need of complete refurbishment.
- 3.5 The Council has also recognised that the extensive portfolio of Parks and Playing Fields required additional investment. Funding has been made available for improvements to the infrastructure, playing surfaces and changing rooms. Work has commenced on infrastructure works in 2018/19 and has been well received.
- 3.6 In 2016 the Council took the decision to invest in Rhondda Heritage Park with the aim of dealing with a marked deterioration in the site, and a decline in visitor numbers.
- 3.7 Members will note that good progress has been made with the delivery of the investment across the services. As part of any future funding opportunities that may arise, Members are asked to consider identifying further investment priorities for the services to build upon the success of what has already been delivered, further enhance the services for customers and ensure their long term sustainability.

4. LEISURE CENTRES – INVESTMENT AND PERFORMANCE

- 4.1 In 2016 the Medium Term Strategic Plan – RCT Leisure Services 2016-2021 was adopted by the Council's Cabinet. The plan set out the goals and aspirations for the development of Leisure operations within Rhondda Cynon Taf, with the clear vision that all residents will be able to access opportunities to undertake regular physical exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle, which maintains and improves their health and wellbeing.
- 4.2 The plan was supported by goals and targets and with the foundations laid in a comprehensive Capital Investment Programme into the service. The investment was aligned with the introduction of a new leisure centre membership package, which offered customers a quality product at an affordable price, supported by well trained staff and effective marketing strategies. The overall aim was to make more people more active more often, by increasing membership, customer retention and the programme of activities on offer at the facilities.

- 4.3 One of the main aims of the Strategy was to invest in the fitness facilities in our Leisure Centres to increase membership and participation, and to reduce the cost of Leisure Services to the Council.
- 4.4 The investment programme was informed by the re-development of Llantrisant Leisure Centre in 2012 and the re-opening of the Sobells Leisure Centre in 2013. The result of these developments was that membership doubled in these centres mainly due to the quality of the fitness suites, and a more strategic approach to marketing. This formed the basis of business plans put forward to inform the Capital Investment Programme announced in 2016.
- 4.5 The first investments were targeted at those centres where the fitness offer was tired, in a poor location in the building, and was underperforming against the known demand in the local area. The centres chosen for investment were Rhondda Sports Centre, Abercynon Sports Centre and Bronwydd Swimming Pool.
- 4.6 Since these projects were completed in 2016/17, these 3 facilities alone have seen their centre memberships and usage increase by over 100%. Appendix 1 gives a full breakdown of usage and membership pre and post investment.
- 4.7 These targeted investments, together with a more focused marketing strategy and new membership scheme has served to increase membership at all facilities, and help maintain the commitment of members whose average length of stay has increased from 5 months to 11 months since investments began in 2016.
- 4.8 Following the initial investments, further projects have been undertaken in Tonyrefail Leisure Centre (new fitness suite), Llantrisant Leisure Centre (replacement equipment) and Hawthorn Leisure Centre (replacement of equipment and health suite). The service has also started on a programme of changing room refurbishment following numerous customer observations about the condition of some of these facilities. Improvements in Bronwydd and Rhondda Sports Centre have been completed. Abercynon Sports Centre has started and will be followed by Sobells Leisure Centre.
- 4.9 Work has also started on improvements to Rhondda Fach Sports Centre. These works include the Council's first indoor 3G facility, and the conversion of the swimming pool hall into a state of the art functional fitness facility, which has been designed to attract sports players looking to concentrate on their strength and conditioning.
- 4.10 Whilst improvements into changing facilities will not contribute to a further rapid growth in memberships, they will make a major contribution to customer retention. Future investments will need to

strike a balance between making sure the offer is refreshed and keeps pace with technology, as well as keeping on top of the condition and appearance of the facilities.

5. THE DEVELOPMENT OF 3G PITCHES

- 5.1 The Council, through a collaborative approach between Leisure and Parks with 21st Century Schools, have compiled a strategic framework for the investment in the development of 3G pitches. The framework compliments the Local Authority's aim of every resident living within a 3-mile radius of a 3G pitch whilst ensuring that each region of the County Borough has a rugby standard 3G pitch, a football standard 3G pitch and an astro-turf pitch (ATP).
- 5.2 Officers from Leisure and Parks and the 21st Century School Team worked alongside the All-Wales Collaboration Group (Sport Wales, Welsh Rugby Union, FAW Trust, Hockey Wales) through the strategic framework process in order to attract external investment in to RCT-based facilities. A total of £405,000 (13.5% of the total £3 million invested in to 3G pitches by Welsh Government via the All Wales Collaboration Group) was invested in to RCT-based facilities including Y Pant Comprehensive School, the Maritime Recreation Ground and Sardis Road 3G.
- 5.3 Alongside these developments the Council has invested further capital monies in the development of 3G pitches across the County Borough. A full list of 3G pitches is included as Appendix 2.
- 5.4 The 3G facilities present the Council with an opportunity to develop a pro-active, collaborative approach to junior sport. Working with the local leagues, sports clubs and the FAW Trust the Council will develop opportunities for the mini and junior age group to train and play on a top quality surface encouraging more children and young people to become active across the County Borough. The all-weather surface has been developed for continued usage during inclement weather. It also allows for back-to-back usage with no need to 'rest' the pitch in between sessions or seasons.
- 5.5 Under the strategic framework future developments should include a rugby standard 3G pitch in the upper Rhondda valley ensuring that the region has access to a football standard 3G, an ATP and a rugby standard 3G pitch.
- 5.6 Other future developments include a plan to introduce a Council wide 3G pitch policy which will seek to maximise usage of both community and school-based 3G pitches and ATP by working collaboratively to ensure facilities are accessible in the evenings and on weekends. This

policy will also propose a consistent Council wide pricing structure for all 3G and ATP pitches.

6. PLAY AREAS INVESTMENT

- 6.1 Back in 2015 the parks section presented a play area condition survey that highlighted a need for substantial investment to improve the deteriorating condition of the play area infrastructure, as well as to modernise and enhance the play experience that these spaces offered.
- 6.2 With the amalgamation of funding from the Council's core capital programme, section 106 planning gain, grants and the RCTInvest programme more than £3.2m has been spent to improve and upgrade 97 of the Council's 215 play facilities.
- 6.3 This investment has facilitated a number of total refurbishments and many partial upgrades. As well as modernising play equipment, improvements have also been made to increase accessibility in and around the play areas. **Appendix 3** gives details of all schemes planned and undertaken from 2015/16 through to 2018/19.
- 6.4 Not only is there a visible difference to how these play facilities look but it is evident that our play areas are being used differently. It is now not uncommon to see facilities being used as a 'destination' for families to meet and socialise together and in some cases host local events which have included teddy's bears picnics and community barbeques.
- 6.5 Through social media it has also become apparent that some play areas are being used by families from outside the County Borough, who travel to our facilities as they are seen to be better than their own local provision.
- 6.6 Whilst 45% of play areas have now received some level of investment it is important for funding to continue so that the remaining facilities can be modernised.
- 6.7 Whilst there is no direct revenue savings to be had from this investment, the benefits of play are widely known and with the diminishing opportunities for children to play outdoors, access to good quality community play facilities has never been more important.
- 6.8 It has been proved that outdoor play aides health and wellbeing. It fosters opportunities for creativity, imagination, social connections, and learned behaviours that have a positive effect on children's social development, motor skill development, attention, and activity level. It allows them to explore their environment, develop muscle strength and co-ordination, and gain self-confidence.

- 6.9 Despite the good progress to date the key limitation has been the availability of specialist contractors to carry out the range of work required. Currently the Council works with two primary contractors, however, it has proved very difficult to find other specialists in the field who meet the standards required

7. PARKS INVESTMENT

- 7.1 The capital programme allocated to the Parks & Countryside section has been set at around £100k per annum for several years. This has primarily been spent on dealing with health and safety issues such as repairs to fencing, path/road surfacing, structures within parks, building repairs/refurbishment and other minor schemes in our Parks & Countryside infrastructure.
- 7.2 In 2016 it was recognised that unless there was an increased capital programme to address some of the repairs and maintenance to the parks infrastructure and buildings, we could be confronted with the situation whereby buildings or facilities may have to close due to them not being in a safe condition for the public to use.
- 7.3 Therefore, for the financial year 2016-17 a capital investment programme was created to start addressing some of the parks buildings issues, and a total sum of £291,000 was allocated to this work. Later that year it was recognised that in addition to the buildings there were a number of areas whereby for relatively small amounts of finance, a more visual impact could be achieved through repairs to footways, roads, fencing, gates, walls, etc. and an additional sum of £106,000 was approved.
- 7.4 This investment continued in 2017-18, with a further allocation of £80,000 to address the problem with floodlights within four of our sites that were in danger of being closed during the winter evenings.
- 7.5 In this current year we are continuing to work on the programme of investment into parks infrastructure, with an additional £730,000 allocation, taking the total investment to date over the 3 year period to £1,228,000. Appendix 4 gives details of spend over the 3 year period from 2016/17 to 2018/19.
- 7.6 Rhondda Cynon Taf has 110 winter sports pitches and changing rooms, and many of these facilities have deteriorated over the last 25 years. Should additional funds become available then priority will need to be given to upgrading changing rooms and improving the drainage of pitches.
- 7.7 The new £3.5m Athletics Stadium in Aberdare was opened in September 2018. The facility was the final part of the £65m 21st

Century schools development which saw the building of the new Aberdare Community School and Sobell Leisure Centre. The stadium and track is built to the highest standards meeting all UK and Welsh Athletics requirements.

- 7.8 The track and stadium facilities include an 8 lane 400 metre track and all facilities to enable the full range of athletics field events. These are supported by a 296 seated stand; 6 brand new changing rooms; an official's room and community meeting room. The main field area can also be used for representative football matches.
- 7.9 The stadium is also the new home for the Cwm Cycling Project which offers adaptive cycles for people with disabilities who have access to the parkland around the Ynys.
- 7.10 The Council is also exploring proposals to invest in a new running track at Bryncelynnog, Beddau, again through the 21st Century School programme and also in improving the existing track at King George V playing fields in Clydach Vale.

8. HERITAGE & VISITOR ATTRACTION INVESTMENT

- 8.1 In June 2016, due to a prolonged period of falling visitor numbers and an acceptance that the visitor experience had become tired, poorly maintained and largely redundant, the Rhondda Heritage Park was transferred to the Leisure Parks & Countryside Service, who were to undertake a thorough operational review of the offer and provide options for the future of the facility.
- 8.2 It was acknowledged that over a period of time, the customers' experience and its appeal had become very limited, with approximately half of the original guided tour being inaccessible due to poor maintenance and upkeep.
- 8.3 Following a two month review period, a report was produced offering a wide range of options that stretched from closure, management by the third sector through to redevelopment of the site.
- 8.4 The Cabinet considered the report in September 2016, and committed to an investment of £500k. The investment was split between ensuring urgent works were undertaken, but also that the offer was refreshed so that the Rhondda Heritage Park could fulfil its potential as a key element in the Council's visitor attraction offer.
- 8.5 Through the investment, a range of improvements have been implemented that has established the rebranded "Welsh Mining Experience" as a recognised quality visitor attraction with the South Wales region. The improvements have included:

- **Miners caged lift** - A new lift was installed that re-instated this essential part of the underground experience
- **Modern Audio Visual Interpretation** – by using modern audio visual technologies to compliment the miner’s tours and providing customers with enhanced experience
- **Refreshing the DRAM experience** – The DRAM now immerses customers in a cinematic journey on a traditional miner’s dram, from the heart of the mine to pit bottom, with customers experiencing explosions and floods along the way. This installation has been extremely well received by visitors of all ages
- **The Black Gold Exhibition – Triumph & Tragedy** – A different Story – A new permanent exhibition now fills the upstairs level and receives superb customer feedback on a weekly basis
- **Catering offer – Cafe Bracchi** - The creation of an Italian themed Cafe Bracchi, offering a modern cafe culture type offer and provides our customers with an experience in line with the expectations of a quality visitor attraction.

8.6 Following the investment there has been a concentrated effort to improve the marketing and promotion of the venue, as well as improving our customer experience, these include the following:

- Rebranding as the Welsh Mining Experience
- A new events programme that aims to attract a wider audience
- Improving signage and general presentation
- Focussed marketing campaigns
- Improved customer contact systems
- New website

8.7 The results of what has been in effect a complete overhaul of the way the Council manages and presents Rhondda Heritage Park are very promising. Key points are:-

- Increase of visitor numbers from 31890 in 2015/16 to a forecast 45,000 in 2018/19
- Increase in income from £120k in 2015/16 to £190k forecast in 2018/19

These improvements have enabled the Council to save £114k per annum on the cost of operating the venue.

8.8 To build on the success of the investment there are a number of further initiatives which are being worked on, that will further enhance the visitor experience and contribute to the long term sustainability of the attraction, including the following:

- Improving the retail space and entrance
- Working with external partners, including Craft of Hearts, Lewis Merthyr Brass Band and the Chocolate House
- Improvements to external approach and roads
- Further essential maintenance, including making safe the historic chimney stack, improving site drainage, and improving the general appearance of the site
- Developing a partnership approach with external agencies including Visit Wales, Royal Mint and Qatar Airways

8.9 The Authority is responsible for over 30,000 museum artefacts, with approximately 15,000 based at Rhondda Heritage Park. Despite the facility being in existence for 29 years, it did not work to a standard that allowed it to gain 'Accredited Museum Status'.

8.10 Over the last 18 months a new method of managing the museum collections has been adopted, along with a range of new collections procedures, and following a very successful inspection in August 2018 from the Chief Museums Inspector, the Council has now been informed that the Rhondda Heritage Park: Welsh Mining Experience has been awarded **full accreditation**.

9. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment screening form has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full report is not required at this time. The screening form can be accessed by contacting the author of the report.

10. CONSULTATION

10.1 There is no requirement for consultation.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no financial implications as a result of the recommendations set out in the report.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

12.1 There are no legal implications as a result of the recommendations set out in the report.

13. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELLBEING AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

- 13.1 The development of new facilities throughout communities in Rhondda Cynon Taf, alongside increased participation, support the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act seven well-being goals improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of the County Borough and Wales.
- 13.2 Improved facilities providing increased opportunities within local communities positively affect the health and wellbeing of those that live and work in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 13.3 The continued subsidised rate for activities ensures that residents get best value allowing them to 'live within their means' whilst supporting people to adopt an active lifestyle.
- 13.4 Improved local facilities provide a safer place for people to visit and enjoy, reducing the levels of anti-social behaviour and other crime.
- 13.5 The development of local community facilities including leisure centres, parks and playgrounds builds cohesive communities creating neighbourhoods where people are proud to live and work'.
- 13.6 Developed visitor attractions provide a vibrant offer focusing on culture as well as active recreation significantly contributing to the Council's priorities.
- 13.7 The collaborative approach to the operation of key facilities within visitor attractions has provided the opportunity for a number of local businesses to thrive and grow.
- 13.8 Developed facilities in close proximity to town centres, including Pontypridd, Aberdare and Porth, contribute to the economic regeneration of the town and wider County Borough developing a prosperous Rhondda Cynon Taf for future generations.

14. CONCLUSIONS

- 14.1 There has been a marked return on the investment into Leisure Services. The service has already surpassed the targets for membership and retention set out in the Leisure Strategy for 2020.
- 14.2 There is also a marked improvement in the performance of Rhondda Heritage Park. The investment has halted the long-term decline in the facility, and now the management team have been able to present an offer that has been enthusiastically welcomed by both existing and new

customers. Future plans should enable the renamed “Welsh Mining Experience” to become a key tourist destination within South Wales.

- 14.3 The success and popularity of the investment into 3G sports pitches is all too evident, and if future plans to increase accessibility allied to affordable pricing come to fruition, then the network of 3G pitches across the County will play an important part in increasing participation, particularly in junior sport, in the future.
- 14.4 The Council’s investment into Leisure and Recreation facilities and visitor attractions is widely acknowledged across South Wales and RCT has now taken a lead role in developing its facilities and operations, and is investing in its estate, to ensure it is fit for future generations.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Background Papers

None

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