



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2021/22

**PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY,
COMMUNITIES & PROSPERITY
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

4TH FEBRUARY, 2021

**REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR OF
PROSPERITY, DEVELOPMENT AND
FRONTLINE SERVICES.**

Agenda Item No:

**REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF COVID
19 ON PARKS AND COUNTRYSIDE
OPERATIONS IN 2020/2021**

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Members of the Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee on the Parks and Countryside Operational service during the Covid 19 period.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note the content of the report:
- 2.2 Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any further matters.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This Council as have all Councils in Wales had to suspend or collapse services in line with national and local rules and guidance to help protect residents, staff and businesses during the Covid pandemic.
- 3.2 The Council's Parks operational service comprises 90 operational staff based in 3 main depots – Rhondda (Pentre Park, Pentre), Cynon (Aberdare Park, Trecynon)

and Taff (Hepworth Park, Talbot Green) and is responsible for the management and maintenance of the Council's parks and sports pitches in the County Borough.

- 3.2.1 The Council's Play Facilities team is made up of 8 staff based in Hepworth Business Park in Talbot Green but with access to a work space in the Parks depot in Aberdare Park, Trecynon. The team is responsible for the maintenance and inspection of all children's Play Facilities across RCT as well as the Capital refurbishment programme.
- 3.2.2 The Council's Countryside Team is made up of 11 staff. 6 are based at Hepworth Business Park in Talbot Green with the additional ranger team of 5 based at Dare Valley Country Park. The team is responsible for maintaining the network of Public Rights of Way, Community routes and Trails as well as council owned countryside sites. The department is also responsible for managing the council's Japanese Knotweed treatment programme.
- 3.3 The impact of the restrictions under the various periods and severity of lockdown measures has in the main deemed organised sport and leisure activities non-essential and has therefore remained suspended for the majority of 2020/21.
 - 3.3.1 Children's play facilities were part of the initial lockdown measures introduced by Welsh Government, and Councils were instructed to lock or immobilise all children's Play Areas, Skate Parks, Mult Use Games Areas and outdoor courts. As part of this measure all construction being undertaken as part of the refurbishment programme was also suspended.
 - 3.3.2 The Countryside department was affected by the initial lockdown measures. Office based staff were limited to working from home and practical work was suspended as part of the initial lockdown.

4. UPDATE /ISSUES ENCOUNTERED/ CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Initially the lockdown in March 2020 resulted in all sports, leisure activities, play and practical countryside work being suspended as they were deemed non-essential services.
- 4.2 The Parks & Countryside operations were initially suspended with minimum essential functions undertaken including litter/dog bin emptying in parks and the unlocking/locking of parks, checking of buildings and dealing with emergencies.
 - 4.2.1 After the Play Facilities were closed the operational and inspection staff were furloughed or redeployed. The remaining staff were able to work from home and undertake their duties
- 4.3 The majority of Parks staff were not working initially and operated on a rota basis to cover the minimum service level required. (March/April 2020)

- 4.3.1 A number of staff were deployed to provide support in other 'essential services'. These included additional teams deployed to Bereavement Services for grave digging duties and supporting Waste services with green waste collections.
- 4.4 As the lockdown restrictions eased for some categories of social/leisure activities both the Parks service and the Countryside Ranger teams increased operations to meet the needs of the community. Play areas were reopened, sports pitches and bowling greens needed essential seasonal maintenance or would have been at risk of going into disrepair and would then have required significant investment to rectify. Maintenance work also resumed on the Public Rights of Way network.
 - 4.4.1 Prior to the lockdown restrictions being eased, staff were brought back into service to carry out inspections and checks on all play equipment and sites, to ensure that Play Facilities could be re-opened safely once restrictions were lifted.
- 4.5 The service continued through the summer to undertake essential maintenance works including grass cutting pitches, renovations, preparation and planting of flower beds, hedge cutting pitch marking (basic).
The work in the autumn and winter periods has included tree works, leaf clearing, culvert cleaning, shrub bed maintenance.
 - 4.5.1 When restrictions were eased play facilities were opened up with the government control measures; and the inspection and maintenance continued primarily dealing with essential measures and prioritising safety.
- 4.6 It should be noted that the Council has kept its Public Rights of Way (PROW) network open throughout the period of the pandemic. However, there has been a significant increase in usage and this has resulted in a number of landowners/farmers taking matters into their own hands by closing public paths on their land. Many of these issues have yet to be resolved.
 - 4.6.1 The Countryside service continued through the summer undertaking essential work to meet the increased public demand for outdoor exercise/activity. Works included footpath and trail maintenance, dealing with increased footpath obstructions due to the pandemic, vegetation clearance, drainage maintenance, tree safety work and invasive species treatment.
 - 4.6.2 There was an increased number of Japanese Knotweed queries/complaints during the pandemic. This was most likely attributable to the public being restricted to their gardens and as a result spending more time and money there. Over 300 sites in RCT were treated as part of the Knotweed programme. In addition, there has been 13 legal claims against the council in relation to Knotweed, compared with zero last year.
- 4.7 All Parks, Play and Countryside staff were kept safe with a number of Covid control measures in place.

- 4.7.1 These included sanitising of vehicle cabs, hand sanitisers in depots, wearing of masks/face coverings, distancing rules in parks and depots, limiting number of staff travelling together.
- 4.8 All services have unfortunately seen a number of staff absent at various times due to Covid related issues either shielding, isolating or symptomatic so have had to prioritise work accordingly.
- 4.9 The service also includes the specific areas of **Tree maintenance and the management of Allotments.**
- 4.9.1 **Trees**
These services have continued to operate in line with Covid restrictions with a targeted approach to a particular problem affecting trees, namely **Ash die-back**. Examples include A4059 Mountain Ash to Abercynon, A4119 Royal Mint.
- 4.9.2 General maintenance of trees overhanging highways and street lighting has been undertaken.
- 4.9.3 Tree surveys are also ongoing to identify trees of poor health or condition growing upon public open spaces. Emergency works and responding to requests and complaints have continued with approximately 150 requests/month for trees and allotments
- 4.9.4 **Allotments**
Allotment allocations and site visits ceased during the first lockdown in March, although enquiries continued and responded to and added onto the waiting list accordingly. Following the re-opening of services allocations and site inspections recommenced with 95% of allotments allocated and further inspections and works planned.

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no Equality or Diversity implications aligned to this report

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1 There are no Consultation implications aligned to this report

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 7.1 There are no Financial Implications aligned to this report

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

8.1 There are no Legal Implications aligned to this report

9. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP

9.1 The Parks, Play and Countryside services align themselves to the Corporate Plan and Corporate Priorities.

9.2 This clearly is linked with the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, helping to create a healthier Wales, a resilient Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 RCT Council are proud of its parks, sports facilities, playgrounds and its countryside and prides itself in providing and maintaining these facilities to a high standard.

10.2 All the teams in Parks and Countryside have continued to maintain services to meet the changing requirements presented by the pandemic restrictions and how it has impacted on the provision of sports and leisure activities in the community.

10.3 In particular the Parks service staff have been deployed as and when necessary to provide support to other Council services.