

AGENDA ITEM 6

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

DATE 8TH SEPTEMBER 2016

RHONDDA HERITAGE PARK – IMPROVING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN DISCUSSION WITH COUNCILLOR ROBERT BEVAN THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM AND PLANNING

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the current Rhondda Heritage Park visitor experience and seek Cabinet approval to invest in refreshing and improving the offer available.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Notes the current operating position of the Rhondda Heritage Park, in respect of visitor numbers, the quality of the visitor experience, the condition of the facility, and the lack of investment over the past decade;
- 2.2 Agree that the Rhondda Heritage Park is a key element of the Council's Tourism offer, recognising the potential economic, social and community benefits that the Rhondda Heritage Park offers the County Borough, and confirms that the Rhondda Heritage Park has a long term future, under the management of the Council;
- 2.3 Agree to invest £500,000 in improving the visitor offer, which will include a new visitor ride simulator, with the improvements being introduced on a phased basis over the next nine months, funded through available Council resources;
- 2.4 Agree to explore opportunities with private and not for profit organisations to make an investment in and to operate the cafe and children's play areas, similar to the arrangements that operate at the National Lido of Wales;

- 2.5 Authorise the Chief Executive to change the management and staffing arrangements of the Rhondda Heritage Park to reflect the proposed changes to the delivery of the visitor offer;
- 2.6 Agree to initiate an application for Lottery Heritage Funding to undertake improvement restoration and development of Rhondda Heritage Park, seeking investment in the region of £2.5m. This will be the second phase of the investment programme and in addition to lottery funding, opportunities for other external funding sources will also be considered to compliment the application.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Rhondda Heritage Park opened in 1990 and over the next six years the popularity of the venue increased to a peak annual visitor number in excess of 75,000 in 1997. The table below shows the visitor numbers since 1990.

Rhondda Heritage Park - Visitor Figures

Financial Year	Paying Visitor	Santa Toy Mine Event	Free Visitor	Total
1990/91	15,005	-	2,754	17,759
1991/92	27,138	-	1,219	28,357
1992/93	34,557	-	3,610	38,167
1993/94	40,994	-	5,145	46,139
1994/95	45,325	-	6,156	51,481
1995/96	52,201	-	9,760	61,961
1996/97	65,210	-	10,479	75,689
1997/98	61,470	-	11,380	72,850
1998/99	47,409	-	8,850	56,259
1999/00	27,679	-	4,638	32,317
2000/01	51,715	-	6,893	58,608
2001/02	49,630	-	5,190	54,820
2002/03	47,301	-	6,862	54,163
2003/04	45,233	-	7,860	53,093
2004/05	32,069	9,458	12,138	53,665
2005/06	27,845	11,003	15,755	54,603
2006/07	26,612	9,712	13,539	49,863
2007/08	25,095	9,165	12,627	46,887
2008/09	18,011	10,458	15,959	44,428
2009/10	13,611	10,695	23,170	47,476
2010/11	7,855	10,937	22,794	41,586
2011/12	10,230	10,436	18,131	38,797
2012/13	7,744	9,746	13,893	31,383
2013/14	8,726	8,419	12,739	29,884
2014/15	4,263	10,291	22,357	36,911
2015/16	8,777	10,292	12,821	31,890

3.2 In 1990 the visitor attraction offered at Rhondda Heritage Park was state of the art. It included an underground experience ride simulator; audio visual presentations in the two engine houses, the miners lift experience and the invaluable engagement of former miners as tour guides to bring everything to life. However, the visitor offer was not refreshed or updated on a regular basis and the visual and simulator equipment eventually failed and has not been replaced. As a result, the Heritage Park has sought to explore other forms of income and in particular deliver events such as Santa's Toy Mine to generate visitor numbers and income.

3.3 The fall in visitor numbers and the failure of the technical visitor experience equipment has been compounded by the fact that the Heritage Park is a large site with many old buildings and the cost of maintaining the buildings is significant. When the Council has competing priorities to maintain roads, bridges, schools and other assets, unfortunately the level of investment required in the Heritage Park has not been available. As a result the Heritage Park has been unable to maintain the visitor experience to the same level as that in 1990.

3.4 A building condition survey along with an electrical and mechanical survey has been commissioned that indicates that substantial investment is required in the fabric of the building to restore this historic facility.

3.5 The Council has made progress over the past two years in seeking Museum Accreditation which will enable the Heritage Park to loan and exhibit collections from the National Museum of Wales. This opportunity will enable the Heritage Park to rotate/refresh aspects of the visitor offer on a regular basis. Subject to Welsh Government's review of the Rhondda Heritage Park's accreditation processes it is suggested that Museum Accreditation could be obtained by March 2017.

3.6 The annual revenue budget of the Rhondda Heritage Park, net of income generated, is in excess of £325,000.

4 THE WAY FORWARD

4.1 In assessing the future of Rhondda Heritage Park, the Council has three options:

- Do Nothing;
- Full or partial closure of the Heritage Park;
- Invest in the Visitor Attraction over a number of years.

4.2 The first two options of Do Nothing or a Full or partial closure of the Heritage Park are not feasible in the long term. The Heritage Park comprises a number of listed buildings such as the engine houses, the winding gear, the stack etc, and the Council is statutorily obliged to maintain these buildings. No other public, private or voluntary sector body is likely to take on the ownership and responsibility for the site from the Council without a significant investment in addressing the building conditions and some form of warranty for the future.

- 4.3 Until recently, the Rhondda Heritage Park was the County Borough's main tourism attraction, and is a landmark reminder of the impact of coal and the industrial revolution on the South Wales valleys. The Heritage Park is not just a local attraction but it is, and has the potential to be a significant, regional attraction, telling the story of coal and its impact on the economic and social well being of communities transforming the country's approach to workers rights, health and safety at work, education and free health care. At the turn of the 20th Century Wales powered the world through coal, transforming the way the world operated.
- 4.4 Most nations across the world celebrate their history and are keen to share their heritage with visitors. This inevitably comes at an initial and on-going revenue cost to the public sector, but it generates an income for local businesses in the region, providing employment and other opportunities.
- 4.5 The opportunities open to the Heritage Park have also changed over the past year. We have the opportunity to capitalise on the success of the new Royal Mint Experience and the National Lido of Wales that are already attracting tens of thousands of visitors to the Borough from across the UK. If the visitor attraction and experience at Rhondda Heritage Park was improved, it widens the tourism experience offered across the Borough, providing not just a one-off day trip to Rhondda Cynon Taf but the opportunity to spend a long weekend etc in the Borough.
- 4.6 The only viable option open to the Council is to invest in the Rhondda Heritage Park over the next few years to improve the visitor attraction. This investment will significantly improve the visitor experience and attract greater fee paying customers, increasing the income received at little or no extra revenue cost. The recent experience in the Leisure Service has shown that the investment in better facilities has increased usage and income levels, which has reduced the level of subsidy required.

What improvements are proposed to the Visitor Offer?

- 4.7 It is proposed that improvements to the visitor offer are as follows:
- **The history of the Rhondda and Black Gold** – there are many stories to tell of the transformation of the Rhondda through coal, major events such as the Tonypany Riots, the introduction of education and healthcare for all driven by the miners welfare movement, the advances in science through innovation in the coal industry and the amazing stories of local individuals such as John Hopla. The layout of the Heritage Park will be restructured to create the space to enable these stories to be told.
 - Phase 1 – new layouts will present key stories of the history of the Rhondda;

- Phase 2 – these will be supported in the future through modern technology where visitors will be provided with personal equipment to tell the stories and supplement the static information available.
- **Guided Tours** – the guided tours are very popular with the visitors.
 - Phase 1 - It is proposed that these will be enhanced by replacing and upgrading the obsolete ride simulator, the Miners Lift Ride, bringing the Bertie and Trevor winding wheels back into operation and the audio visual presentations in the two engine houses. The simulator ride in the coal cart was the main attraction in the Heritage Park, and its demise has had a considerable impact on visitor numbers and income. A significantly upgraded replacement will again be the highlight of the Guided Tours for many visitors, in particular the younger visitor. The reintroduction of the simulator ride will also be a key aspect of the proposed marketing campaign to “relaunch” the promotion of the Heritage Park;
 - Phase 2 – it is proposed to introduce interactive audio portraits, video walls, projected animation and educational interactive displays;
- **Gallery and Cafe** – to improve the layout of the main entrance building to improve the use of museum exhibits and to tell the Rhondda stories, it is proposed that:
 - The Cafe is relocated to the ground floor, adjacent to the reception area, and becomes an Italian Cafe. This will also tell the story of the Italian migration to the South Wales valleys and how Italian Cafes have become part of our heritage. It is proposed that this provision is operated by an external partner, similar to the arrangement in the National Lido of Wales;
 - the upstairs Gallery and vacated Cafe space provides the space to offer the Rhondda story through new exhibition panels and exhibition panels that allow for many of the previously unseen artefacts, to be exhibited;
- **Energy Zone development** – the children’s play area at the rear of the site is underused and the building associated with the area is not used. It is proposed that the Council explores whether this could become a Play Centre for younger children. The Council has been approached by two experienced Play Centre providers who see the potential for offering such a facility in the Greater Pontypridd/Rhondda area;
- **Events** – A structured and varied events programme has been key in encouraging visitors to return to the Heritage Park, and generate a positive contribution to the running costs of the Park. It is proposed that this is increased to offer the following annual events:

Classic Car Show	Spring
Easter	April
Miners Fortnight	July - August
Tribute in the Park	Summer
X-Scream	October
Spooktacular	October
Santa's Toy Mine	November - December

- **Management and staffing arrangements** – It is proposed to bring together the management of the Council's three main tourism attractions, the National Lido of Wales, Dare Valley Country Park and the Rhondda Heritage Park under the responsibility of the Leisure, Parks and Countryside Service. Small changes will also be made to the staffing structure of the Rhondda Heritage Park to accommodate the proposed changes to operational delivery;
- **General presentation of the site** – action will also be undertaken to improve the visibility and access to the Heritage Park. The trees along the Hafod By-Pass have grown and now hide the Heritage Park from passing traffic. These will be cut back to allow the key features of the Park to be clearly visible such as the winding wheel and stack. This will allow the wheel to be lit in the evenings and to be visible to rail and road commuters entering the Rhondda. It is also proposed to improve signage throughout the site and resurface the highway outside the Park. A small maintenance team will also be created from within existing resources to support the regular maintenance of the Heritage Park, National Lido of Wales and Dare Valley Country Park, to ensure these key tourist attractions are well maintained.

- 4.8 Phase One focuses primarily on improvements to the visitor offer, resulting in an immediate uplift in the quality of the visitor experience that can be marketed with confidence. It also addresses any immediate building issues identified within the building condition survey.
- 4.9 Phase Two seeks to re-establish the Rhondda Heritage Park as a leading visitor attraction within South Wales. It is recommended that both Phase 1 and Phase 2 would form part of a Lottery Heritage Funding application, along with any/all other relevant external funding applications. These developments will result in improvements and restoration of the physical infrastructure of the park buildings and also significantly improve the visitor offer. This will form a strong call for discussions with the Heritage lottery Fund in developing an application to the Heritage Grants Programme.
- 4.10 Discussion with the Heritage Lottery Fund leading to an application will look to maximise their support for the development programme outlined above.

5 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

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

6 CONSULTATION

- 6.1 If Cabinet decides to proceed with the recommendations in this report, officers will consult with the Friends of the Rhondda Heritage Park and local heritage and historical societies on the proposed changes. In doing so the Council would welcome the input from these groups in improving the visitor offer at the Heritage Park.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 It is estimated that the capital cost of Phase 1 is £500,000 and would be funded from within existing Council resources as part of the ongoing review of investment programme spend, plus the assessment of funding availability in year as part of budget monitoring for 2016/17 and budget setting in relation to 2017/18.
- 7.2 The capital cost of Phase 2 is estimated to be in the region of £2.5m. It is proposed that we will begin to develop a Lottery Heritage Funding application in 2017/18 alongside the Phase 1 programme.
- 7.3 The proposed changes should have a positive impact on the Council's revenue budget and it is estimated that the revenue budget requirement will reduce by up to £100,000 per annum. This saving is generated through increased visitor income, increased income from catering franchise, and changes to the staffing arrangements. These savings will be assessed as part of the overall development programme and will be built into the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan when values are confirmed.

8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 8.1 None at present.

9 LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP

- 9.1 Two of the Council's three priorities are Building a Strong Economy and Creating Neighbourhoods Where People Are Proud To Live And Work. The proposed improvements to the Rhondda Heritage Park will have a positive impact on both priorities.

Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Background Papers

None

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Background Papers

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