

Meeting of:	<b>Cabinet</b>
Date of Meeting:	<b>Thursday, 05 February 2026</b>
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	<b>Place Scrutiny Committee</b>
Report Title:	<b>Review of Pilot Leisure Activity at Cosmeston Country Park.</b>
Purpose of Report:	To provide a review of this summer’s pilot of an on-water leisure activity in Cosmeston Country Park
Report Owner:	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Sustainable Places
Responsible Officer:	Director of Place
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	<p>Legal Services – Committee Reports  Operational Manager, Accountancy  Head of Sustainable Development  Team Leader, Countryside Services  Head of Corporate Landlord  Head of Shared Regulatory Services</p> <p>Ward Member Consultation - Sully and Plymouth Ward Members.</p>
Policy Framework:	This report is a matter for Executive decision by Cabinet
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The importance of green and blue spaces and in particular the Country Parks at Cosmeston and Porthkerry is fully recognised by the Council. Ensuring a long-term future of these locations is considered particularly relevant having regard to experience gained during the recent pandemic as well as ensuring that such places and the important nature and ecology found within them can be protected for future generations. The future sustainability, protection and enhancement of these sites, relies upon continued investment by the Council and at a time of considerable ongoing financial pressure, particularly on critical statutory services, this requires a continued consideration of appropriate income generation activity. That activity also ensures that these spaces are used and enjoyed by an increasing number of visitors with a focus on offering leisure activities alongside maintaining the spaces as important open space to be enjoyed by all.</li> </ul>	

- Following an approach by a leisure operator the Council agreed to using part of the eastern lake at Cosmeston Country Park for an aqua park water-based activity from early July through to September 2025 to test the suitability of the location for this type of activity.
- Whilst that pilot has since concluded, this report reviews that activity and assesses the outcomes regarding overall attendance and financial implications, environmental and ecological impacts, water quality and safety, visitor experience, community and stakeholder response and the alignment with the long-term strategy for the park and its long-term viability.
- The report also considers the wider potential for supporting our Country Parks through income generation activities to ensure that they remain as important ecological and wildlife havens and are open to residents of the Vale of Glamorgan into the future.
- The report makes a recommendation regarding how it is considered that the Council should progress next year and beyond.
- Ward Members for the Sully and Plymouth wards have been approached for comments and any responses will either be provided as supplemental information or reported verbally at the Cabinet meeting when the matter is considered.

## **Recommendations**

1. That Cabinet notes the report which recognises:
  - (a) the increase in visitor numbers to the park and associated expenditure associated with the aqua park leisure activity.
  - (b) the ecology reports from the operator's ecologist and an ecologist commissioned by the Council which notes from an ecological and legal standpoint, the Aqua Park's operation was compatible with the continued breeding of protected species on site and overall, the available dataset indicates that breeding by key species occurred successfully during the Aqua Park's operational trial with bird use of the site being broadly equivalent to the 2022 baseline dataset available for the site.
  - (c) the concerns expressed by some residents and users of the park in correspondence and demonstrations and noting the petitions received which sought to prevent the aqua park trial.
2. That Cabinet notes the outcome of the trial undertaken in Summer 2025 which has now concluded and in advance of any further decisions being made on future water and land based activities, authorises the undertaking of a comprehensive review of options and opportunities for activities that exist at Cosmeston Country Park to help sustain the long-term future of the Country park status.
3. That as part of a review of options, the Council or its agents will undertake a further full year of breeding bird surveys in 2026, in the absence of potential impacts such as leisure operations on the water and that the Council and Natural Resources Wales agree a further baseline survey, monitoring, mitigation and enhancement strategy well in advance of any future leisure installation and operation at the Park.
4. That in pursuance of Recommendations 2 and 3, the Council also undertakes a further full 12 months of water quality testing, in the specific area identified for leisure uses during the aqua park trial and that this testing be undertaken weekly during June, July, August and September.
5. That subject to the agreement of Recommendations 2, 3 and 4, a further report be presented to Cabinet in late 2026 to advise of the outcomes of the work undertaken in regard to a review of options, the baseline assessment and water quality testing so that any future opportunities can be considered and if appropriate agreed.
6. That this report be referred to Place Scrutiny Committee for consideration and that any recommendations be referred back to Cabinet for consideration.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

1. To apprise Cabinet of the current position following a trial period for the aquapark during the Summer period 2025.
2. To consider and identify suitable opportunities for appropriate (including from an ecological and visual standpoint), sustainable, safe, tourism and leisure activities within Cosmeston Country Park for the 2027 season that realise income opportunities

which can be reinvested in the Park to support the important biodiversity and re-wilding work already undertaken.

3. To allow a full ecological base line assessment to be made in 2026 without formal leisure use of the water being undertaken and using this assessment to inform a future offer and tendering process.
4. To allow for a further base line to be established for water quality in the eastern lake in 2026 without formal leisure use of the water being undertaken and using this data to inform any future opportunities and tendering process.
5. To allow further consideration by Cabinet and for that consideration to be informed by the review of opportunities, baseline surveys and water testing.
6. To allow consideration by Scrutiny Committee.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1** As Members will be aware the eastern lake in Cosmeston has been previously used for leisure purposes such as paddle boarding and boating and the park has offered several concession sites (including an established café building) for refreshment operators. However, it is considered that there remain opportunities for leisure and commercial activities which could support the wider operation and services offered by the Country Parks.
- 1.2** The Country Parks within the Vale of Glamorgan are considered to be destination venues for both residents and visitors as well as important green and blue spaces for local residents to enjoy. They remain pivotal in attracting visitors and are considered vital as open spaces for local residents and to the local economy. However, they constantly need to adapt to the needs of users, and the development of new sustainable activities/attractions will improve the offer to users and encourage greater footfall, which in turn allows further investment to maintain and enhance these important spaces. Residents of the Vale of Glamorgan will also recognise how important these green spaces are to support wellbeing and healthy lifestyles.
- 1.3** As part of the Placemaking work undertaken in the 4 main towns in the Vale of Glamorgan (and particularly in Penarth), the potential for more leisure activities at the County Park in the school summer holidays was identified as important to residents and families.
- 1.4** Piloting a leisure use on the water in Cosmeston has allowed the Council to consider how we can support the use of our important green and blue spaces in the future as part of a wider reshaping programme and to support the sustainability of the country parks into the future.
- 1.5** Notwithstanding the above, the relevance and importance of biodiversity, ecology, wildlife and nature is acknowledged and well understood. This is central to the Council's thinking when considering the long-term future of the Country Parks. Diversification of the offer at the Country Parks must, as a consequence help support the important nature conservation and biodiversity work which is undertaken in the Country Parks by the Council and volunteers. Furthermore, it is

recognised the important role that the Country Parks have in supporting the Council's actions to deal with the declared nature and climate emergency.

- 1.6 It is also important to note that increasing and improving the offer at the country parks is not a simple exercise particularly with the competing pressures around long-term funding and the need to support ecology and biodiversity alongside the differing expectations of users of the parks. It is against this context that the recent trial of the aqua park at Cosmeston should be assessed and that a consideration of the next steps should be taken. This is alongside a consideration of any other possible income generating activities in both parks which could also provide support.

## **2. Key Issues for Consideration**

- 2.1 Following an approach by an aqua park operator who was previously located in Cardiff Bay, it was agreed to run a pilot operation for an aqua park on the eastern lake at Cosmeston Country Park for a trial period. It was recognised that this was a trial or pilot exercise for a temporary period and that it would in turn allow for a full assessment of the impact of activity to be undertaken based on a relatively short period of the summer (July- early September).
- 2.2 Members will be aware that this lake has been used in the past for leisure uses such as paddle boarding and boating and the operation was considered to be an extension of those previous uses in terms of providing a leisure offer at the site.
- 2.3 The west lake remained activity free and will always be retained solely for wildlife all year round. In addition, and irrespective of the possible or potential leisure-based uses of the water, all water based activities on the eastern lake are required to cease from the 1st of November until 28th of February of the following year to ensure that overwintering wildfowl populations are not disturbed.
- 2.4 More widely and irrespective of the aqua park trial, improving the leisure offer at the Country Parks generally is key their financial sustainability and allows the Council to continue to support all residents and visitors by ensuring that these important sites are not only well maintained and managed, but are available to residents without the need to charge for entry. By opening the Country Parks to sustainable leisure uses, the Council and Countryside team can also continue to support, fund and develop the important ecology and biodiversity projects at these sites.
- 2.5 The trial operators were mindful of the Country Park's important role in providing spaces for residents and visitors to enjoy and sought to minimise the impact of any operation by locating any off-water support facilities away from the lakeside and in an area away from the main park.
- 2.6 Furthermore, in the future there is the potential of expanding the Country Parks sites (particularly in Cosmeston) making more land available to address the nature emergency through re-wilding, tree planting and by increasing biodiversity. Appropriate leisure operations could help the Council fund future

improvements to the parks recognising the importance they have to both residents and visitors alike.

- 2.7 Maintaining and growing the visitor base to the parks is also important to support existing facilities, such as the café and the other concessions in both Country Parks.
- 2.8 Consultation undertaken as part of Placemaking in Penarth also identified a concern that there are not enough activities for younger people to enjoy in and around Penarth, particularly in the summer months. Activities at Cosmeston Country Park whether on-water or on-land would significantly improve the offer that would be available to younger people in the school holidays.
- 2.9 Having regard to the above, it was agreed as part of the previous report to Cabinet that an assessment of the pilot activity would be undertaken and a further report brought to Cabinet which will assess the outcome of the pilot leisure scheme and present options for the future.
- 2.10 In order to undertake this assessment of the pilot activity the report will consider 5 key elements, visitor numbers, financial impact, Water Quality and Safety, environmental and ecological impact and community and stakeholder feedback.

#### **Visitor numbers and financial impact**

- 2.11 To assess visitor numbers and financial impact the Council has used its tourism advisors, GTS and they have calculated an estimated economic impact for the Park, based on visitor data provided by the Aqua Park and the Vale of Glamorgan STEAM tourism figures.
- 2.12 Economic impact estimates
  - The Aqua Park attracted around 16,000 visitors, including participants and spectators.
  - Visitors spent a total of £645,000.
  - The average spend per person, including ticket costs, food and drink, transport and other expenses was £40.
  - Including indirect effects, the total economic impact of the of the aqua park was £960,000.
  - Of the total economic impact, 22% was generated by Vale of Glamorgan residents and 78% by those from other areas (including holidaymakers).

#### **Water Quality and Safety**

- 2.13 In respect of water quality and general safety of the leisure activity it should be noted that prior to the pilot commencing officers sought advice from Shared Regulatory Services (SRS) to establish a water testing regime that supports a risk-based approach to safeguarding public health. This regime included regular sampling and monitoring to ensure that any deterioration in water quality was promptly identified and if necessary, addressed.
- 2.14 Water analysis was undertaken at a Public Health Wales (PHW) laboratory, with sampling carried out in two separate regimes by both the Council and Aqua Park

staff. The methods used were consistent with those previously employed by the Council.

- 2.15** All samples that were taken in the vicinity of the aqua park apparatus were within the relevant thresholds for both E.coli and Enterococci.
- 2.16** It should also be noted that prior to the activity commencing tests were undertaken in respect of the condition of the bottom of the lake through a diving survey, a water chemistry report, a legionella disease report and a heavy metal report all of which were within acceptable parameters.
- 2.17** A water sample was taken from the far side of the lake on 21st August by park rangers which did fall into the poor category in terms of E.coli and Enterococci, however this was an isolated result and multiple samples were collected throughout August by both the Aqua Park and the Council and all samples taken within the Aqua Park area returned results within accepted parameters.
- 2.18** Furthermore, samples taken prior to 21st August and throughout September from the far side of the lake have consistently shown results within acceptable levels. The result from 21st August appears to be an isolated anomaly.
- 2.19** In respect of the safety of the activity itself it should be noted that a full safety and risk assessment was prepared by the operators before operations commenced and during the pilot full records were kept of all injuries which occurred to customers of the activity. This was in accordance with the operating norms set out in the risk assessment and all injuries were fully recorded.
- 2.20** A low number of injuries were recorded in relation to the numbers of users of the activity with the vast majority of these being cuts and bruises from landing awkwardly. Aqua Park staff were trained in first aid and in all cases a full report was completed in accordance with the relevant risk assessment.
- 2.21** Members will note that the aqua park is a physical activity centre and all customers are advised that there is always a risk when jumping in water from height etc. However, there were no injuries or illness reported which could be directly attributable to water quality or to the condition of the lake or to the way in which the activity was managed.
- 2.22** Overall, it is considered that there were no reasons highlighted above which would prevent the Council offering a leisure or water activity opportunity to the market in the future.

### **Environment and Ecological impact**

- 2.23** It is important to note that the Country Park and the lake is recorded as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, as such it was necessary for the Council to obtain formal assent from Natural Resources Wales for the activity to take place and this was granted on 23rd May.  
<https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/Documents/Our%20Council/Press%20Office/A0049121-Assent-CosmestonLakesSSSI-230525.pdf>
- 2.24** This assent contained several conditions regarding the operation of the activity.

- 2.25** Furthermore the operators themselves produced a ecological report both before during and after the activity ceased which can be found on the following web page: [Council to welcome Aqua Park to Cosmeston Country Park](#)
- 2.26** Notwithstanding these reports which were prepared by a local ecologist, the Council commissioned a further independent report from Thomson Environmental Consultants to provide a full assessment of the activity, the reports produced and to consider the impact of the pilot.
- 2.27** The report recommended that, irrespective of the reports already commissioned, a new baseline survey be undertaken (the last being in 2022), which should include developing a monitoring, mitigation and enhancement strategy in 2026 and this be implement in advance of any future leisure operation. This strategy should be informed by a full year of breeding bird surveys, in the absence of potential impacts. This would ensure that the impacts of a more long-term use over several seasons could be properly monitored.
- 2.28** The report further notes that habitats within the site will inevitably change over time, through management (either active or absent) and succession. Bird populations and distributions at the site will also likely change over time, partly in response to habitat changes. Therefore, at least some elements of the survey, monitoring, mitigation and enhancement strategy should be implemented during each operational year of any leisure activities on the water. The aim of this would be to ensure that site population and distribution changes (particularly of Schedule 1 species, but also to all nesting birds) do not lead to any breaches in legislation.
- 2.29** The strategy should be designed and supported by a suitably qualified ornithologist with sufficient knowledge of the site and familiarity with all species involved. The strategy should include the following:
- Use of habitat assessment and mapping to inform targeted survey effort (including number of visits required).
  - Reference to habitats as justification for potential presence / likely absence of species.
  - Gathering a dataset including the optimum periods for detecting target species, according to best practice guidelines.
  - Adapting survey methods as required, depending on results, and acknowledging that breeding pairs may use different nest sites within and between years, including in response to changes in habitat suitability for nesting.
  - Monitoring bird use at the site and implementing control measures as necessary to avoid legislative breaches or negative impacts on breeding birds.
  - Increasing nesting and foraging opportunities for Priority species (Bird Survey and Assessment Steering Group, 2025) using CLCP in the long term, alongside suitable management techniques to avoid conflict between the Aqua Park and the local conservation status of breeding birds.



- a full year of breeding bird surveys during 2026 in the absence of activities, to inform monitoring, mitigation and enhancement requirements.
- This recommendation will be incorporated into the management of Cosmeston during 2026 and will directly inform any tender process for a future leisure operator (subject to the outcome of the survey).

### **Community response**

- 2.30** Members will be aware that there were significant community concerns regarding the announcement of the pilot activity, these concerns mainly centred around the impact of the activity on the SSSI status of the park and the wider impact on ecology and wildlife including birds, mammals and other species.
- 2.31** While a significant number of objections to the operation were received the majority of these were received before the commencement of the aqua park operations and were focused through the Vale Action Group (VAG) and their members.
- 2.32** A 7,585 signature petition with signatures obtained on Change.Org was submitted. This petition was entitled “Halt the Installation of the Aqua Park at Cosmeston Lakes Country Park, Penarth.”
- 2.33** An analysis of this petition showed that 2,874 signatories came from within the Vale of Glamorgan with the largest number from Penarth (1,212).
- 2.34** Members should note that formal responses were provided to all correspondents who made email or written contact with the Council providing advice and explaining the nature and duration of the pilot.
- 2.35** The VAG submission also made a 230-page submission following the closure and removal of the Aqua Park which can be viewed in the background papers.
- 2.36** In response to the issues raised in this submission it should be noted that the trial was permitted to allow the Council to fully assess the impact of the leisure activity, but it should also be noted that before it was undertaken and during its operation contact was maintained with both the appointed ecologist and Natural Resources Wales (NRW).
- 2.37** The Council notes that the VAG submission included surveys of visitors to the park, although these surveys were not discussed with or agreed by the Council in advance. Unfortunately, we cannot therefore make a judgement on whether the surveys were representative of visitors to the park. Moreover, the surveys were not set within the relevant context of how the parks themselves would be funded into the future. It is also important to note that the Council does have evidence through its car parking receipts that there was an uplift in visitor numbers for the months of July and August and while some of this could be attributed to the good weather during that period the additional leisure offer is also clearly relevant.
- 2.38** While ecology and biodiversity information was submitted as part of the report from VAG it is noted that none of this work has been undertaken by an ecologist and in response the Council is satisfied that the information provided by ACER is

robust and furthermore a formal independent assessment was undertaken by an ecologist appointed by the Council who has made further recommendations.

- 2.39** Issues of a perceived increase in anti-social behaviour have also been raised and attributed to the aqua park operation but a review with park rangers and staff has indicated that there was no increase in the amount of anti-social behaviour including people entering the water over period of park and that it was very similar to 2024 and previous years.
- 2.40** In conclusion while the concerns of some local residents and users of the park were noted, it is considered that the preparatory work undertaken by the Council in advance of the aqua park coming to Cosmeston was sufficient in respect of its pilot and short-term nature of the use and that the information which was obtained was invaluable in preparing a longer-term strategy for leisure uses in Cosmeston. This information will also be supported by a full base line ecological assessment to be undertaken in 2026 which will further advise the leisure strategy in consultation with NRW.

#### **Next Steps**

- 2.41** It should be noted that the Council has taken a cautious approach to developing income generating activities in the country parks. In trialing a one-off part-year for water leisure activities, we have been able to fully consider the impact of such an activity on the operation of the park and its important role.
- 2.42** It is important to note that the Council could have proceeded to offer an extension to the existing trial period if it so wished. However, being mindful of the park's importance to local residents, wider leisure uses and to wildlife and ecology generally and having regard to the outcome of the review of the 2025 activity, we consider the development of a baseline assessment of the wider ecology and wildlife at Cosmeston alongside a further assessment of the future direction of the Cosmeston Country Park and potential income generation opportunities at the Country park is appropriate.
- 2.43** While it is important to recognise the need to find alternative funding to support the work undertaken in our Country Parks in the ongoing difficult budgetary position, the Council is taking a decision to pause and reflect on the pilot activity undertaken in 2025 while also considering what other opportunities may be explored (including but not restricted to water-based activities) to ensure the long term sustainability of the Park.

### **3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?**

- 3.1** The original aims of this opportunity regarding the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives were as follows:
- 3.2** LONG TERM – On-water and on-land leisure activities provide an additional attraction for the Country Park and help support the important nature, biodiversity and ecology work within our Country Parks and ensure the long-term future of the Park.

- 3.3** PREVENTION - By working with other sectors to bring a leisure use to the park which will include onsite security and CCTV facilities it will have a positive impact on crime and disorder by reducing the opportunities for unauthorised camping, lighting of fires, vandalism, fly-tipping and litter dropping. Enhanced leisure opportunities of varying types also contribute to health and wellbeing.
- 3.4** COLLABORATION – Any proposals would involve working with partners to support the Council to develop and fund the opportunities at the Country Park and allow the Council to continue to make this important green space available to residents of the Vale of Glamorgan.
- 3.5** INTEGRATION – The proposed pilot has allowed the Council to consider how the use integrates with the wider operation of the park and to consider whether the leisure use would be harmful or detrimental to the park itself.
- 3.6** INVOLVEMENT – It was always envisaged that if the proposed pilot was a success, a comprehensive marketing of the opportunity or opportunities at the park would be undertaken which would allow the Council to select the best operator for a longer-term operation. Now that the trial has been undertaken and an initial assessment undertaken, it is considered both opportune and timely to carry out a wider piece of work to assess the wide range and scale of opportunities that could be further explored at the Park. Such a comprehensive approach is considered to be preferential to simply focussing on water based activities alone.

#### **4. Climate Change and Nature Implications**

- 4.1** The Countryside Service offers a comprehensive environmental education package to schools, community groups and users.
- 4.2** Charges seek to ensure sustainability of sites and promote local economic development and employment through tourism.
- 4.3** Increased leisure and tourism activities within the Vale of Glamorgan will primarily reduce the need to travel for residents.

#### **5. Resources and Legal Considerations**

##### **Financial**

- 5.1** Saving targets for the Countryside Service had included the generation of additional income and these proposals had sought to raise income from users of services which require resources to maintain and/or deliver, in a fair and balanced way, whilst also maintaining viable competitive services and attracting visitors and tourists as appropriate. The savings requirement has been deleted in the Budget for Consultation approved by Cabinet on 15th January 2026.
- 5.2** Estates and Legal officer`s resource will be required because of entering into any legal agreement with a third party, some of these costs will be reimbursed by the third party, where appropriate.

- 5.3** The Council will be required to negotiate terms and conditions and enter into appropriate legal agreements in respect of Recommendation 4.
- 5.4** Planning permission may be required by proposed operators following the pilot scheme and it will be for those businesses to seek the relevant permissions if necessary.

### **Employment**

- 5.5** There is no employment implications for the Council associated with this report.
- 5.6** The leisure operator employed 42 people as part of the activity with 32 living within 10 miles of Cosmeston and 15 living within 5 miles.

### **Legal (Including Equalities)**

- 5.7** The Council will be required to negotiate terms and conditions and enter into appropriate legal agreements in respect of Recommendation 4.
- 5.8** Planning permission may be required by proposed operators, and it will be for those businesses to seek the relevant permissions, if necessary, in consultation with the Council.

## **6. Background Papers**

NRW Assent form

<https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/Documents/Our%20Council/Press%20Office/A0049121-Assent-CosmestonLakesSSSI-230525.pdf>

ACER Ecology report

<https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/Documents/Our%20Council/Press%20Office/P2754-Cosmeston-Lakes-Technical-Note-27-4-2025.pdf>

Further ecology report

<https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/Documents/Our%20Council/Press%20Office/P2754-Cosmeston-Lakes-Technical-Note-Cettis-Warbler-1-6-2025.pdf>

Bird survey report:

<https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/Documents/Our%20Council/Press%20Office/P2754-Cosmeston-Lakes-Technical-Note-Cettis-Warbler-18-7-2025.pdf>

Thomson Ecology review.

Vale Action Group report.