

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>OUTDOOR ADVENTURE – HILSTON PARK CLOSURE</b>
<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>CABINET</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2020</b>
<b>DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:</b>	<b>ALL</b>

**1. PURPOSE:**

- 1.1 To update members with regard to the ongoing situation for the Outdoor Adventure Sites, the impact of covid19 on the service for 2020/21 and the longer term implications.
- 1.2 To declare Hilston Park surplus to service needs and to transfer the asset to Landlord Services to progress a disposal of the site and to approve any associated staff redundancies costs if suitable redeployment for the staff cannot be found.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 2.1 To agree the formal closure of the Hilston Park site and transfer the asset to Landlord Services by 31.12.20.
- 2.2 That costs of disposal are met corporately and funded from the Council's fixed asset disposal cost reserve and, if necessary after due process and application of redeployment evaluation and MCC's Protection of Employment Policy, severance costs are met from the Council's redundancy reserve or through flexible use of capital receipts by way of use of Welsh Government's capitalisation direction.
- 2.3 That the capital receipt subsequently generated from the disposal of the Hilston Park site is ring-fenced to the extent that it enables the proposed capital investment to be made for Gilwern Outdoor Adventure Service and if subsequently supported by Cabinet and Council.
- 2.4 That Cabinet subsequently receive proposals for the future of the Outdoor Adventure Service and consolidation of the service in Gilwern.

**3. KEY ISSUES:**

- 3.1 Members received a report in February 2020 which outlined the history of the Gwent Outdoor Education Service over the last 5 years. The joint service had been previously supported by annual subsidies from four Local Authority partners but core funding was frozen from all partners in 2006 with Newport County Council withdrawing its subsidy in 2013 and by 2018/19 Torfaen County Borough Council and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council had also withdrawn their subsidy, leaving Monmouthshire to recover all costs through charges to customers.

- 3.2 As a result of this, the Gwent Outdoor Education Service partnership was dissolved at the end of 2018/19 and a reduction made from three to two sites, retaining Hilston Park and Gilwern Outdoor Adventure Centres and returning the Talybont site to Newport County Council.
- 3.3 Members received a further report in July 2020 which showed that the cost of delivering the service in 2019/20 was £247k against a budget subsidy of £131k resulting in an overspend of £116k. Concerns were expressed about the future of the service, given that the long term aim of the service is for it to be sustainable and to break even. Over the past two years, there has been a continuing reduction in residential occupancy and in 2019/20 occupancy levels were an average of just under 45% with Gilwern at 47% and Hilston at 39%.
- 3.4 Members fully support the continuing provision of the Outdoor Adventure Service and see it as valuable and important. The ambition is to ensure that the offer at Gilwern is maximised and the creation of a sustainable service, which serves the children and young people of Monmouthshire. The service allows our children to engage in environmental and adventure activities which are about and connecting to the natural world. It helps to transform knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours through direct engagement with the outdoor environment for the personal and social benefit of everyone. Purposeful experiences in the outdoors can be a catalyst for powerful and memorable learning and outdoor learning is more than adventure sports or simply taking what could happen indoors outside.
- 3.5 Outdoor Learning provides a highly effective way of addressing some of our key challenges, including;
- Appreciation of biodiversity and sustainability, and pro-environmental behaviours
  - Developing a sense of place leading to greater engagement with the community and an appreciation of the opportunities available to live, learn and work in the local area;
  - Providing a safe and supportive setting to enhance social skills, appreciate and value difference.
  - Engagement with nature and the environment for health, wellbeing and nature connection, leading to lifelong participation and outdoor competence.
  - Developing character, resilience, positive risk taking.
- 3.6 The service had been reviewing its operating practices following an independent review in December 2019 and working with other MCC departments to extend provision. This was starting to open up some new possibilities for service redesign but further recommendations and actions identified from the review were unable to be implemented due to the continuing circumstances. All bookings for the remainder of the academic year had been cancelled and both sites closed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 with the majority of staff furloughed.
- 3.7 There is a significant risk that post COVID the market will take a considerable amount of time to recover which means that the service would continue to operate at a significant deficit to the Authority. To reduce this financial risk and given the existing market and the uncertainty about the deliverability, the service should operate from one site only. Previous reports had highlighted the high maintenance costs at Hilston because of its listed status, with significant backlog maintenance issues and the lack of disabled access make it unsuitable for some users. Gilwern can provide a purpose specific venue with the ability to host two separate schools in one visit, due to the layout of its accommodation block and has the bed space to be able to do so.

3.8 The Gilwern site is the preferred option as it the larger of the two sites, it is a level site, offers accessible accommodation and is more cost effective to operate. Service diversifications away from the traditional residential provision for schools has included.

- Work with MCC Children with Disabilities Team
- Residential provision for children with Autism.
- Positive Future Groups (Sports development / Youth Service collaboration)
- Individual referrals from MCC multi agency early intervention and prevention panel. Some examples used through lockdown have included ‘teams 1:1 and home exercise sessions, weekly live class delivered by instructor.
- A base for the Duke of Edinburgh scheme of which Monmouthshire is one of the top performing teams in Wales.

3.9 The Gilwern site will however requires some capital investment to bring it up to a required standard, additional work will also need to be undertaken to be able to separate groups in order to maximise the number of bookings on site.

3.10 A decision to close Hilston Park will raise a potential requirement to place up to eight employees ‘at risk of redundancy’. Consideration will be given to retaining skills within the Outdoor Adventure Service where possible and as appropriate, staff will be considered for opportunities in keeping with the Council’s protection of employment policies. It is not possible at this stage to give an accurate estimation of costs associated with severance of employment given that there are processes to work through. It is not envisaged that this will be a significant cost at this stage.

#### 4. **EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):**

4.1 Summarised below for Members’ consideration from Future Generations Evaluation located in Appendix B:

‘The service in its current two site format needed review for both financial and practical reasons to ensure it is sustainable and continues to provide a quality service across the remaining two sites. By its very nature the service will continue to provide quality outdoor learning experiences, jobs and new skills albeit at one site – the service will continue to deliver this whilst also ensuring the facilities and activities deliver positive outcomes for all.

#### 5. **OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

<b>Option</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Risks</b>
Do nothing	None identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the service is no longer sustainable in its current form</li> <li>• service deficit will increase</li> </ul>
Close the Hilston Site and delete staffing posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces financial risk to the Council.</li> <li>• There is an opportunity to redeploy the staff into the wider Council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It may not be possible to redeploy the staff and redundancy payments may be incurred</li> </ul>

## **6. EVALUATION CRITERIA**

- 6.1 The evaluation assessment has been included in Appendix B for future evaluation of whether the decision has been successfully implemented.

## **7 REASONS:**

- 7.1 The Outdoor Adventure Service is no longer financially sustainable in its current form. Occupancy of both sites is below 50% and therefore it makes sense to continue to provide the service at one site, thereby reducing fixed costs whilst continuing to provide this valuable service.

## **8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

- 8.1 As outlined in the report there is an ongoing impact from COVID and a significant risk that post COVID the market will take a considerable amount of time to recover which means that the service would continue to operate at a significant deficit to the Authority and as a result of income shortfalls. Welsh Government funding is currently being claimed to cover income losses at this time and beyond any UK government funding for staff having been furloughed. It remains unclear as to whether Welsh Government funding will continue until the service becomes operational and restores income levels and this therefore remains an ongoing risk along with the fixed costs of the service that will need to be incurred in the interim.
- 8.2 Subsequent to the closure of Hilston Park there may be costs arising from redundancies should no alternative redeployment opportunities within the Council. These are not seen to be significant and to the extent that they cannot be met from the MonLife revenue budget they will be met from the Council's redundancy reserve or through flexible use of capital receipts by way of use of Welsh Government's capitalisation direction.
- 8.3 There will be associated costs with securing the site pending disposal of the asset by Landlord services. An appraisal will need to be undertaken to ascertain potential future uses for the site and beyond costs of surveys and pre-application advice it should be noted that there will be ongoing running costs (rates, utility and security costs) that need to be borne up and until the point of disposal. Such costs will be met corporately and funded from the Council's fixed asset disposal cost reserve. There will be a capital receipt from the sale of the site.
- 8.4 The level of capital investment subsequently required for the Gilwern site will form one aspect of the business case for the future consideration and proposals for the service going forward. This level of anticipated capital investment is not seen as significant. It is proposed that the capital receipt subsequently generated from the disposal of the Hilston Park site is ring-fenced to the extent that it enables the proposed capital investment to be made and if subsequently supported by Cabinet and Council.

**9      CONSULTEES:**

Select Committee Members  
Cabinet Members  
SLT  
HR  
Service area staff  
Unions

**10     BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

Appendix A - Evaluation Criteria  
Appendix B - EQIA

**11     AUTHOR:**

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## Appendix A – Evaluation Criteria – Cabinet, Individual Cabinet Member Decisions & Council

<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>OUTDOOR EDUCATION – SERVICE CHANGE PROPOSALS</b>
<b>Date decision was made:</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> November 2020</b>
<b>Report Author:</b>	<b>Ian Saunders, Marie Bartlett</b>

### **What will happen as a result of this decision being approved by Cabinet or Council?**

The Outdoor Adventure Service will no longer be available at the Hilston Park site. Alternative provision will be available at Gilwern Outdoor Adventure Site. The posts at Hilston will be deleted and the staff either re-deployed or redundancy payments made.

### **What benchmarks and/or criteria will you use to determine whether the decision has been successfully implemented?**

Hilston Park will be returned to Estates for disposal / alternative provision, the service re-provisioned and the staff re-deployed. The existing staffing structure at Gilwern will be reviewed and the service restructured to ensure the service can best respond to the new challenges ahead.

### **What is the estimate cost of implementing this decision or, if the decision is designed to save money, what is the proposed saving that the decision will achieve?**

The cost of the decision will involve possible redundancies. There are no budgeted savings from the closure of Hilston however should the site remain open there is likely to be a substantial deficit.