



Report of Senior Project Manager

Report to Chief Officer Parks and Countryside

Date: 16 Mar 2021

Subject: Closing West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre and adjacent greenhouse

Are specific electoral wards affected? If yes, name(s) of ward(s): Pudsey	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Has consultation been carried out?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Will the decision be open for call-in?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, access to information procedure rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary

1. Main issues

- A report to the Council's Executive Board in October 2020 highlighted a budget gap in 2021/22 of £118.8 million, of which £59.1 million is due to the ongoing financial impact of Covid-19. In response to this financial position, the council has been undertaking a programme of service reviews to identify savings that will contribute towards closing the budget gap and enabling the authority to present a robust, balanced budget position in 2021/22 and beyond.
- As part of the review process, it was agreed that public consultation would be carried out on a proposal to close the West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre and adjacent greenhouse (both situated in Pudsey Park). This would represent a saving of £90k per annum on associated running costs. It should be noted that the visitor centre has remained closed to the public due to Covid-19 restrictions since March 2020.
- Following the consultation the saving associated with this proposal was included in the council budget for 2021/22 which was approved at full council on 24 Feb 2021.

2. Best Council Plan implications (see the [latest version of the Best Council Plan](#))

- In line with the council's ambitions and values, the proposals set out in this document aim to support the council's goal to protect services that support the most

vulnerable, whilst ensuring that the council becomes more financially sustainable for the future.

3. Resource implications

- The proposed closure of the visitor centre and adjacent greenhouse would save Leeds City Council £90k on staffing, animal feed and veterinary costs as well as the running costs of the buildings.

Recommendations

The Chief Parks and Countryside Officer is recommended to approve the following:

- a) The closure of the West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre and adjacent greenhouse.
- b) That animals are safely and sensitively relocated to other collections in line with the guidelines set out by BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums).
- c) That staff based at the visitor centre replace casual and seasonal animal keeper staff at Tropical World and Lotherton.
- d) To note that the Head of Asset Management will take responsibility for the visitor centre to consider options for future use including potential disposal.

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This report sets out a proposal to close the West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre, and adjacent greenhouse based in Pudsey Park.

2. Background information

- 2.1 The West Leeds Country Park is a 32 km circular trail running from the city centre, through the green corridor of the Aire Valley around Calverley, south of Pudsey and into Armley and Wortley. The Visitor Centre is in Pudsey Park, it is free to enter and is a registered zoo. It keeps captive indigenous species ranging from birds, mammals and fish and explains the different habitats in the area, and how they benefit wildlife.
- 2.2 The visitor centre and adjacent greenhouse, which houses a range of tropical and temperate plant species, have been closed to the public for health and safety reasons relating to the pandemic, since March 2020. The visitor centre and adjacent greenhouse cost the council £90k a year to run – these costs include staffing, animal feed and veterinary costs along with the running costs of the buildings.

3. Main issues

- 3.1 In October 2020, a report to the Council's executive board highlighted a budget gap for 2021/22 of £118.8 million, of which £59.1 million is due to the ongoing financial impact of Covid-19. In response to this financial position, the council undertook a programme of service reviews to identify savings to help close the budget gap and enable the authority to present a robust, balanced budget position in 2021/22 and beyond.

- 3.2 As part of the review process, it was agreed that a public consultation would be carried out on a proposal to close the West Leeds Country Park visitor centre in Pudsey Park to save the council the costs of running the visitor centre which amount to £90k/year.
- 3.3 The consultation was responded to by 2,035 people in total. The details of the findings are reported in *appendix 1*.
- 3.4 Following the consultation process, and in the light of the costs of running the visitor centre and greenhouse, the following statement was included in the budget report agreed at Executive Board on 10 Feb 2021:
- "The West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre has been closed to the public due to Covid-19 restrictions and savings of £90k p.a. have been identified on the assumption that it will not re-open. There is a potential opportunity to repurpose or replace the existing buildings with a park cafe that could retain some of the educational elements of the visitor centre. Following consultation, the centre will remain closed and will not be converted into a café by the council; and engagement will take place with interested parties on potentially taking over the building".*
- 3.5 Following the consultation the saving associated with this proposal was included in the council budget for 2021/22 which was approved at full council on 24 Feb 2021.
- 3.6 As a consequence, it is proposed that the visitor centre and greenhouse remain closed and that:
- The animals are safely and sensitively relocated to other animal collections in Leeds (e.g. Lotherton), or in the UK in accordance with the guidelines set out by BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums).
 - The visitor centre staff are moved to replace casual and seasonal animal keeper staff at Tropical World and Lotherton (which is possible within budget).
- 3.7 Once closed, the buildings will become the responsibility of the Leeds City Council, Asset Management service who will explore options for their future use including potential demolition.

4. Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

- 4.1.1 A public consultation was undertaken on the proposals which was responded to by 2,035 people in total. Whilst the majority of respondents did not wish to see the visitor centre closed, there was no clear consensus on a financially sustainable alternative.
- 4.1.2 The full report on the findings of the consultation is available in appendix 1.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

- 4.2.1 An equality screening has been undertaken for these proposals and is attached to this report.

4.3 Council policies and the Best Council Plan

- 4.3.1 In line with the council's ambitions and values, the proposals set out in this document aim to support the council's goal to protect services that support the most

vulnerable, whilst ensuring that the council becomes more financially sustainable for the future.

Climate Emergency

- 4.3.2 If the buildings are permanently closed, significantly less (if any) power and water will be required to manage them, so impact on the climate could potentially be reduced.

4.4 Resources, procurement and value for money

- 4.4.1 The proposed closure of the visitor centre and adjacent greenhouse will save approximately £90k on staffing, animal feed and veterinary costs along with the running costs of the buildings.
- 4.4.2 There would be 2 FTE animal keeper staff displaced as a result of the visitor centre closure. However, there will be no requirement to implement the managing staff reduction process due to the opportunities that are available within Parks and Countryside for them to replace casual and seasonal animal keeper staff elsewhere in the service.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information, and call-in

- 4.5.1 This could be considered as an administrative decision however in the interests of openness and transparency is considered as a significant operational decision. This decision is not subject to call in.
- 4.5.2 The following statement was included in the budget report agreed at Executive Board on 10 Feb 2021 *"The West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre has been closed to the public due to Covid-19 restrictions and savings of £90k p.a. have been identified on the assumption that it will not re-open. There is a potential opportunity to repurpose or replace the existing buildings with a park cafe that could retain some of the educational elements of the visitor centre. Following consultation, the centre will remain closed and will not be converted into a café by the council"*
- 4.5.3 Following the consultation the saving associated with this proposal was included in the council budget for 2021/22 which was approved at full council on 24 Feb 2021.
- 4.5.4 Leeds City Council, Asset Management Service will oversee the future of the buildings to ensure relevant legal obligations are fulfilled.
- 4.5.5 Relocation of the animals will be managed by the council in accordance with the Zoo Licensing Act 1981.

4.6 Risk management

- 4.6.1 Visitor centre staff will work at Tropical World and Lotherton, replacing casual and seasonal animal keeper staff within budget.
- 4.6.2 Relocation of the animals will be managed by the council in accordance with the Zoo Licensing Act 1981.
- 4.6.3 Once the buildings are empty, Leeds City Council, Asset Management will take over responsibility for them, and will manage any associated risks as necessary.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The visitor centre and greenhouse collection currently costs £90k each year to run and there no obvious business case for the council to manage these buildings in a more financially sustainable way. It is therefore proposed that the centre and greenhouse are not reopened and that steps are taken to relocate the animal collections and that staff are redeployed to support other animal attractions in the service. There may be opportunity to consider further use or operators for these buildings which would be considered once a decision is taken to transfer them to the council Asset Management service.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 The Chief Parks and Countryside Officer is recommended to approve the following:
- a) The closure of the West Leeds Country Park Visitor Centre and adjacent greenhouse.
 - b) That animals are safely and sensitively relocated to other collections in line with the guidelines set out by BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums).
 - c) That staff based at the visitor centre replace casual and seasonal animal keeper staff at Tropical World and Lotherton.
 - d) To note that the Head of Asset Management will take responsibility for the visitor centre to consider options for future use including potential disposal.

7. Background documents¹

- 7.1 None.

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.