

## BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Gnoll Estate Country Park project is an exciting, dynamic initiative to plan, co-ordinate and deliver activities related to the environment, heritage and tourism across the park, working in conjunction with the Levelling Up Funding programme in Neath. This will change the reality and perception of the area and its community, and promote it and the wider region as a highly-desirable place to live, work and visit, importantly with tangible economic benefits.

Through the Local Authority, existing strategic locations that already serve local communities and attract visitors have been identified and assessed as being suitable to be developed into a network of proposals up and down the Vale of Neath corridor. Importantly, this approach is not simply about physical infrastructure development or the buildings themselves at each of the locations. Rather, in keeping with the aims and aspirations of the Well Being of Future Generations Act in Wales, the aim is for sites to develop and deliver against the following themes and opportunities:

- A high-quality user and visitor experience with excellent facilities and amenities, including exemplary environmental standards
- The development of educational, skills and training opportunities
- The encouragement and support of active lifestyles to improve health and wellbeing, acting as focal points and locations for formal and informal outdoor activities, including green social prescribing
- Promotion and use of local healthy food and produce to support wellbeing, and boost and help sustain the local/foundational economy
- The inclusion, fostering and development of local community and enterprise involvement in running the sites.
- Enhancing the natural environment of the park to support and increase biodiversity and ensure resilience to change (including climate change) is improved.

The intention is to utilise key sites in the Vale to spread the benefits across the wider valleys. As well as destinations in their own right, these key sites should tell the stories of the Vale of Neath and vitally act as launchpads that encourage local people and visitors to explore and discover the surrounding area, including the towns and villages, and the wider landscapes. As part of a wider vision, the sites should connect physically where possible, through high-quality walking and cycling routes and public transport improvements to encourage wellbeing and exploration of the valleys.

### The Criteria for the Key Sites

The generally agreed principles in assigning the key sites are as follows:

- Provide a memorable and outstanding visitor and user experience - 'Wow' factor
- An evolving creative approach to interpretation and promotion including developing narratives around the landscape, biodiversity and culture of the immediate area and the Vale of Neath
- The diversity of the different sites is embraced to reflect the identities of the different communities, enhancing the visitor experience
- Connectivity (physical and digital) with other key sites to provide a coordinated, complementary approach that supports a consistent high-quality offer at each
- Launchpads to encourage and enable wider exploration of local towns and villages developing strong links to local communities.
- Provide opportunities to develop longer walking and cycling trails and routes to strengthen local and landscape-scale habitat connectivity enhancing our natural resources within the Vale of Neath and the wider South Wales area.

As one of the key development sites evolving from this, the essential outputs for Gnoll Estate Country Park are described as:

- Reinstating the significance of the park as a key historic development in the establishment of Neath and the wider Vale of Neath
- High-quality visitor facilities including café/visitor centre
- High environmental standards and commitment to contribute to wider ecosystem enhancement Green Key (or equivalent) environmental standards for accommodation if applicable
- Commitment to promoting the Vale of Neath through co-branding and appropriate signage and creative interpretation at the site
- Commitment to the enhancement of park biodiversity through sensitive interventions that work with and promote nature and are part of a site wide management and conservation strategy
- Commitment to development of the following:
  - High-quality, sustainably produced local healthy produce procured locally and used on site
  - Hosting of guardians/rangers to support educational and interpretation activities concerning the landscape and heritage in the local area and the wider Vale
  - Health and well-being orientated exercise, nutrition and social inclusion linked to wellbeing, e.g. DDA compliant, dementia friendly, biodiversity rich, facilities for families, health programmes
  - Good sustainable transport links especially around active travel (cycling and walking)
  - Involvement of community organisations and enterprise partners such as the Woodland Trust and the Friends of the park, as appropriate, in operating and/or supporting the sites to foster local involvement and develop foundational economy opportunities.