

Fairlands Valley Park – A review

- Scope of review
- Background
- Current offer
- Finance
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Future opportunities
- Recommendations

Fairlands Valley Park



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Scope



- SLC a leading leisure consultancy undertook an independent review of the strengths and weaknesses of the current offer in terms of both quality and commercial viability of the activities and services provided on site.
- Consultation with selected key stakeholders including elected members, council officers and the current site operator, Stevenage Leisure Ltd (SLL.)
- A high-level assessment of future opportunities for the site, together with relevant case studies, which explores ‘the art of the possible’ and is aligned with the wider regeneration of Stevenage.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Background

- Built in the early 1970's, Fairlands Valley Park, located in the heart of Stevenage, consists of 120 hectares of parkland stretching from the A602 in the south up to the A115. The park is bisected by Six Hills Way and linked by an underpass.
- The southern section of the park, known as the South Field, consists of a large area of natural open space providing links to three conservation areas
- The northern section, characterised by over 20 acres of open water, with 3 linked lakes and a balancing pond – the Main Lake, the Millennium Lake and the Environment Lake, Sailing Centre with meeting room, office space, workshop and changing rooms Climbing Tower and High Ropes Course
- Café
- Recently refurbished Children's Play Areas and Aqua Park, kiosk & toilets



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Background

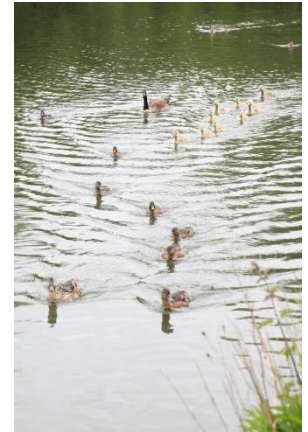
- SLL currently manage the sailing centre including the provision of all water sports activities, the high ropes course and climbing tower, aqua park and travelling show bookings on the South Field. These facilities and services form part of the Council's wider leisure management contract which runs until 2023.
- The café and kiosk (located by the aqua park and children's play area) is operated by Costello's under a lease with SLL.
- The fishery management within the park is managed by Welwyn Garden City Angling Club on behalf of the Council, who are responsible for the management and maintenance of all areas outside the responsibility of SLL.
- All other areas of the park are maintained and managed directly by the Council's Parks and Open Spaces Team
- The fragmented nature of the above arrangements has led to challenges with the operational delivery of services on site.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Current offer

- The park is much loved by local people and seen as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of Stevenage. The Council (including Members) feel the same. It serves a hugely important purpose, acting as a ‘green lung’ for the town and is perhaps the town’s/Council’s most important asset.
- There is a strong celebration of bio-diversity in parts of the park.
- The Sailing Centre focuses on water based courses and education sessions, the former is primarily used by people outside of Stevenage.
- Pay and play access at the Sailing Centre is very limited, SLL agreed to pilot a pay and play programme over the summer holiday which had very limited success.
- The Aqua Park is a highly popular free facility that attracts huge numbers of customers on fair weather days.
- The café offers an average standard of basic catering
- The website is poor and offers very little in terms of information and interactivity.
- The Sailing Centre and compound are poorly presented



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Sailing Centre Finance

| | 2017/18 | 2016/17 | 2015/16 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Total Income | 119,584 | 123,999 | 137,155 |
| Total Expenditure | 247,636 | 226,450 | 299,986 |
| Operating Surplus (+) / Deficit (-) | -128,052 | -102,451 | -162,831 |

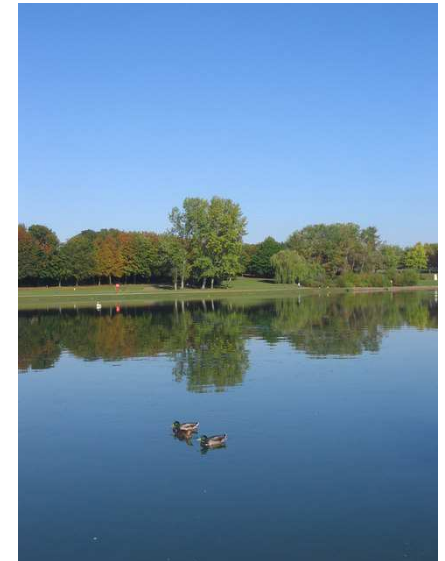


- The figures in Table 1 show an average operating deficit of c. £131K per annum.
- Approximately 50% of income is generated through sailing courses, school bookings and hire of grounds.
- Staffing is the biggest cost, comprising approximately 60% of overall expenditure. The staffing cost exceeds total income generated by an average of £54K pa over the last 3 years

Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Strengths and weaknesses

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|--|
| FVP is a well-loved and well-used community asset. It is considered to be the 'jewel in the crown' of the Council's assets and the 'green lung' of the town. | Unimaginative signage on Six Hills Way road junction. |
| A large site offering a combination of structured activity areas and informal, natural open space. | Site offer not obvious on entrances to site. |
| Central location surrounded by residential development, nursery and schools. | Approach to central café building from the rear/side. First views are of the building's roof and are uninviting. |
| Well connected to a network of roads, footpaths and cycle ways and served by multiple access points (11 pedestrian points). | Visually and physically cluttered high ropes/boatyard area feels like a storage yard rather than a public space. |
| Good provision of car parking in various locations sited close to the facilities. | No clear separation of high ropes/climbing wall and boatyard. The footpaths lead directly into this space. |
| Site contours add to character of site. | Café building tired and dated and does not open out onto terraces. |
| Tiered levels offer wide views of lake. | Uninviting information reception. |
| Well maintained mature landscape which forms backdrop to views. | Lack of information available on wildlife. |
| Attractive lakes on two levels. | Website is unimaginative. |
| Popular aqua park and play area with parking close by. | Leaflets available describe facilities which are not on site. |
| Good quality pathways. | Site signage incomplete and inconsistent. |
| Absence of anti-social behaviour. | Bandstand underused, appears incomplete and abandoned. |



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Strengths and weaknesses

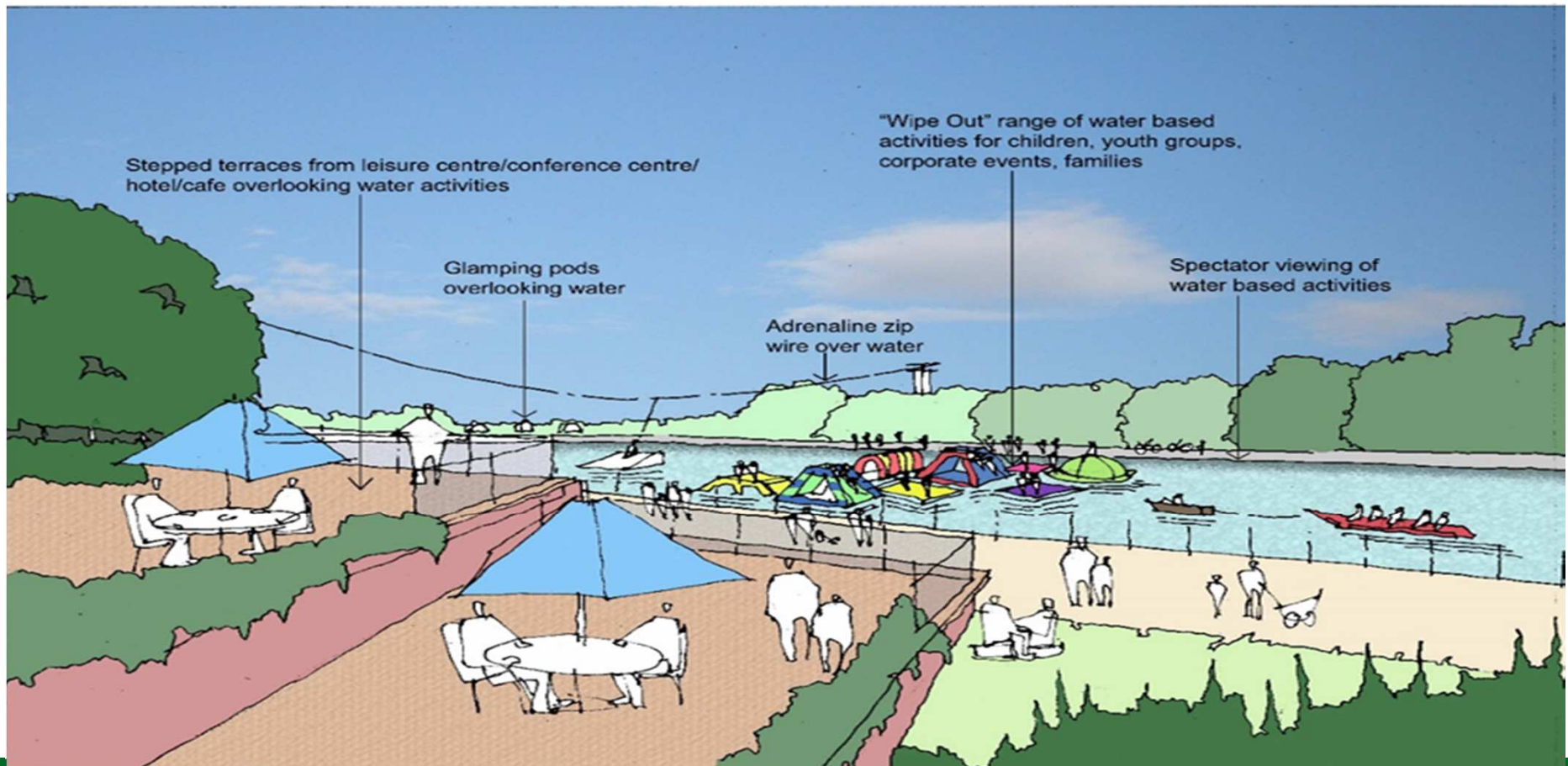
| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|--|
| Excellent mix of facilities and services. Very well qualified staff. | Many facilities & services underused The staff prefer to provide specialist high level and costly water based courses which are staff intensive and generally are subsidised. |
| Park is well maintained and has Green Flag status. | Sailing Centre staff do not take ownership of issues that arise, including litter picking within the Sailing Centre and Aqua Park areas. |
| Park has high footfall. | There is a lack of pay and play services from the Sailing Centre. |
| The Aqua Park is very popular. | This managed by Pool staff on overtime which is more costly and less reactive than Sailing staff managing. |
| The Sailing Centre is a good information point. | The Sailing Centre is closed on Sundays (a high footfall day) and Mondays, the facility is not staffed to meet seasonal demands. |
| The Café offers good standard food. | Despite being a subcontractor for SLL, the Café service contract is not managed by SLL. There are not any specifications in relation to menu choices, cost of products and opening hours. External seating is poor and often tables are not cleaned. |
| There is good storage on site. | The compound area is untidy and unsightly and is the dominant area on the site. |
| The Café and Sailing Centre is a good mixed facility. | The Sailing Centre and Café are poorly presented and lack an attractive frontage. |
| There is plethora of wildlife and planting. | There is a lack of information regarding the wildlife and planting. |
| There is a dedicated website for the Sailing Centre. | The website lacks detail and is not very interactive. |



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

“There is an overarching opportunity to explore development of a more exciting, vibrant and financially sustainable offer which redefines FVP as a ‘destination’ whilst retaining a strong ‘local’ offer and protecting the open space.” (SLC, 2018)



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

- There is sufficient space and suitable landscaping to create a co-ordinated outdoor activity offer that would complement the water sports activity and provide a sustainable, year round income stream for the site. This may include a more attractive high ropes facility with zip wires, climbing, archery, nature trails, team-building, woodland craft, bike and segway hire etc.
- There is sufficient space and suitable landscaping to provide additional attractions that appeal to children and families and are supported by a strong business case e.g. adventure golf.
- There is an opportunity to combine these new income generating activities with improved free to access facilities such as adventurous play areas, outdoor gym and picnic areas.
- There is an opportunity to explore development of a higher quality food and beverage offer which better meets modern expectations and complements activity on the site. This could even extend to a ‘destination’ restaurant offer which capitalises upon the attractive setting and draws visitors from a wider area.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Future opportunities

- There is an opportunity to explore development of additional, indoor activity such as Clip and Climb, softplay etc. to provide a year round offer and additional income streams.
- There is an opportunity to explore development of conference and/or training facilities on the site, linked with team-building activities and possibly function space.
- There is an opportunity to optimise the ecological interest of the site through better interpretation/signage linked to nature trails and woodland walks.
- To improve access point signage to the various locations around the Park
- Increasing usage and activity on the South Field
- An opportunity to promote more events linked to the cultural strategy.



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Short term opportunities

- Improve the external appearance of the building frontage
- Clear up the compound and improve the appearance of the area
- Continue to work with SLL to improve the pay and play offer and change opening hours to reflect user demand in the park
- Work with Parks and Open Spaces to consider FVP as part of an overall parks strategy, linking to considerations around an overall leisure strategy for the town.
- In light of the end of the leisure contract in 2023, review the best management options for the future delivery of services with the park



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

In Summary

- The Park is highly valued by the town
- Current leisure management contract ends 2023
- Limited non specialist use of the Sailing Centre and open water facilities
- Short term opportunities to improve the presentation of the Sailing Centre
- SBC will continue to work with SLL to improve the public offer, including “pay and play”
- Longer term SBC needs to consider the future management of the park
- In the future there are opportunities to consider improving the Sailing Centre and Café to provide a higher quality destination venue at the park



Fairlands Valley Park – A review

Questions, Comments,
Suggestions?