

Sandwell Valley Master Scoping

Final Master Plan February 2024



Introduction

Prominent T LS is delighted to have worked with Cabinet Members and Council Officers to prepare this Master Plan for Sandwell Valley as part of the master scoping exercise. The Master Plan provides a long-term vision for Sandwell Valley which promotes ecological and financial sustainability, and connects the community with the heritage.

This master plan has been developed with the aim of ensuring that Sandwell Valley is a sustainable, accessible, relevant and valued community asset for future generations.



Contents

Section	Pages
Executive Summary	03-04
Project Methodology	05-06
Strategic Context	07-10
Sandwell Valley - Current Assessment	11-26
Benchmarking - Sandwell Valley	27-38
Visitor Survey	39-40
Gaps & Opportunities	41-42
Vision - The Master Plan	43-75
Major Events - Feasibility	76-77
Master Plan Summary	78-79
Capital Summary	80-81
Implementation Roadmap	82-83

Executive Summary

This master plan sets out a vision to secure a sustainable future for Sandwell Valley. The master plan is supported by a business plan, which provides a 10-year financial forecast for Sandwell Valley, building on the baseline information provided by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council officers (SMBC).

In summary, the plan recommends:

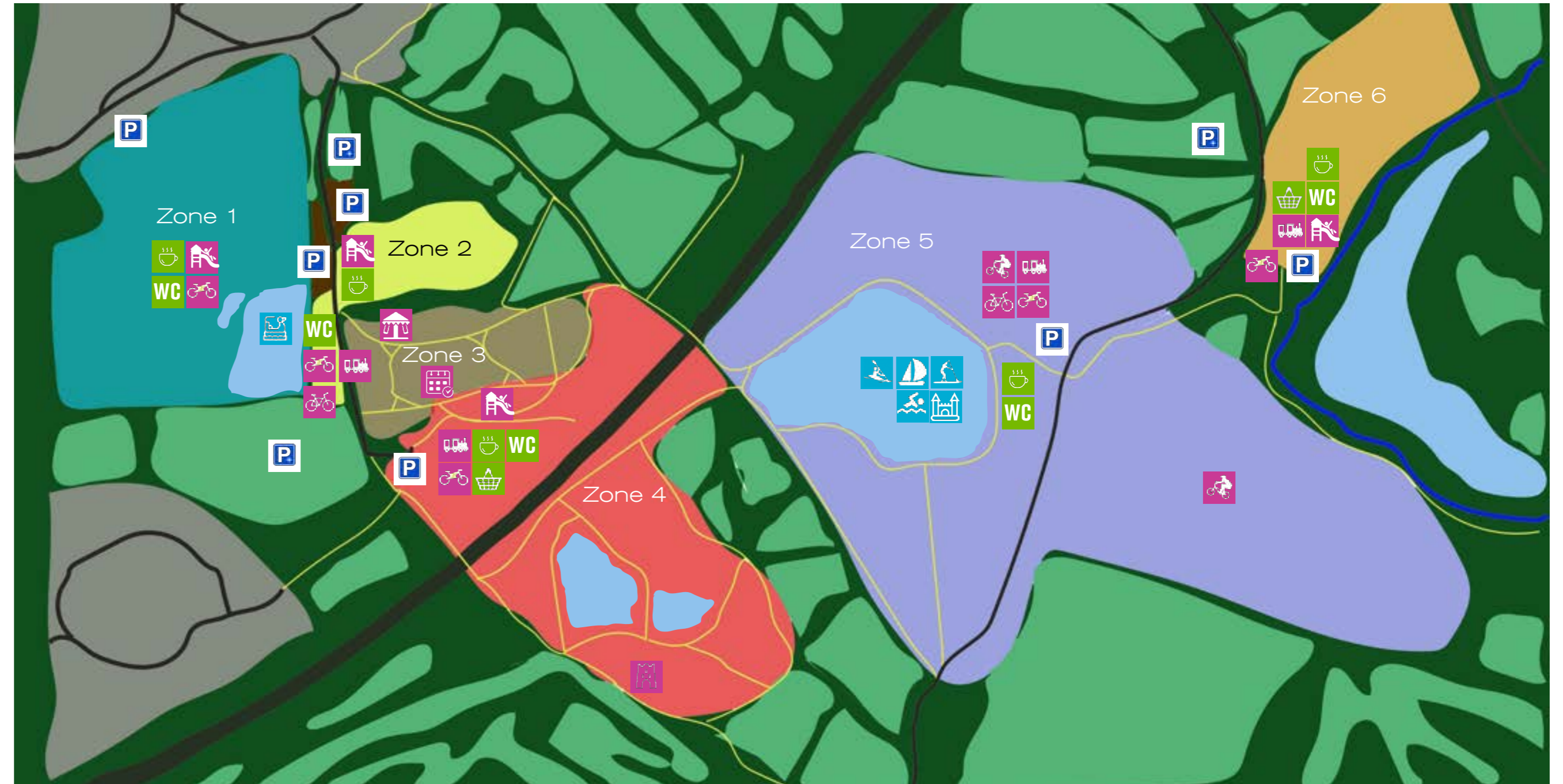
- To work with partners and stakeholders to prepare a ten year conservation and heritage plan for Sandwell Valley, to protect, nurture, and improve these elements for current and future generations.
- Sandwell Valley is zoned into six key areas:
 - Zone 1: Dartmouth Park
 - Zone 2: Pavilion, Adventure Play & Activities
 - Zone 3: Showground & Fairground
 - Zone 4: Sandwell Valley Country Park & Priory Woods
 - Zone 5: Swan Pool, Jubilee Woods & Urban Bike Track
 - Zone 6: Forge Mill Farm
- Each zone is promoted as a 'day out', offering different attractions for visitors.
- Connectivity between each zone is improved and promoted with e-bikes, improved signage, marketing and the use of a land train at peak periods.
- The delivery of events focuses on the family market, particularly on affordable seasonal trails to provide days out to local families.
- Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre receives improvements that help better connect people with it's rich heritage whilst improving commercial sustainability by increasing the attractiveness as a wedding and conferencing venue and providing more reasons for families to visit during peak periods.
- Swan Pool to receive a significant uplift by replacing the sailing club with a new water sports centre that also provides an attractive public cafe area overlooking the water.
- Improvements to Forge Mill continue with the introduction of a display barn and new education centre to support the expansion of the existing education programme.
- Improvements to car parking, including marking of bays, reinforcing overflow car parking areas and enhancements to signposting and booking methods. Car park improvements should not compromise existing green space, and promote the overall attractiveness of the park.

To deliver the sustainable master plan prudential borrowing totaling £7,856,057 is recommended.

Delivering the master plan will help increase the attractiveness of Sandwell Valley for the benefit of the community, increase overall visitor numbers and promote a sustainable future.

The Master Plan

More detail is included on page 78, which includes a key.



Project Methodology

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) is seeking a master plan for Sandwell Valley. Sandwell Valley has a comprehensive business plan in place which aims to increase visitors to attractions to 200,000 visitors a year and plans to be financially sustainable within the next three financial years.

To provide an objective, data-led master scoping exercise for Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, this document follows a robust, evidenced based approach.

This approach should remove any element of professional bias and through clear, logical reasoning will ensure that no option or opinion is unfairly or prejudiced over any other.

The project methodology is based on a well-defined series of steps that have been used successfully in other locations. These steps are outlined on page x.

This document includes the following:

- As assessment of the existing provision within Sandwell Valley, highlighting key strengths and weaknesses within the context of a local, regional, and national short and long-term strategies and policies
- Stakeholder engagement, which includes direct meetings with key stakeholders and a wider online survey
- Benchmarking of existing provision, against other similar Country Parks
- A gap analysis detailing the potential opportunities at Sandwell Valley
- A mapped vision that addresses the gaps
- A supporting business model to deliver the vision
- Key recommendations and next steps

The skill set within our team of experienced consultants and partners adds value to the local research, feedback and evidence to provide Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council with a commercially and ecologically sustainable and viable set of recommendations.



Strategic Context

The value of parks and open spaces is recognised at national level in terms of the contribution they make to healthy lifestyles, quality environments, sustainability and opportunities for learning.

As one of the largest area of undeveloped countryside in the West Midlands, Sandwell Valley is a major asset, not only for Sandwell, but for the wider region.

Strategically, Sandwell Valley Country Park contributes towards the overall corporate 2030 vision of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.

Within the 2021-2025 Sandwell Plan, Big Plans for a Great Place, there six identified outcomes that can be in part fulfilled through the Sandwell Valley Country Park. These outcomes are listed below with commentary as to how it is believed that the Country Park can contribute towards achieving them in italics :

- The best start in life for children and young people

Sandwell Valley Country Park provides a series of fantastic, local outdoor spaces for children and young people to enjoy spending time within to enrich their lives and form positive, lifelong, childhood memories.

- People live well and age well

Sandwell Valley Country Park provides spaces to be active, spaces to relax, spaces to socialise and spaces that enhance a feeling of well-being for everyone in the borough. The Sandwell Valley Country Park is already a well-loved, local asset and contributes towards people leading a healthy life.

Specifically, the Country Park can help the Council meet several of the 'healthy lives' objectives that are listed within the corporate plan.

Activities within the park can:

1. Promote physical and mental well-being
2. Create local, community based opportunities for people to work together to maximise the participation within the boroughs assets

3. Bring people and organisations together with a common purpose of improving and enriching the lives of Sandwell residents

- Strong, resilient communities.

Sandwell Valley Country Park contributes to a strong cohesive and resilient community in Sandwell, through providing a place that the whole community are proud off and a place that they can come together to enjoy time together.

The Country park will become a key visitor and destination gateway into Sandwell to enhance the local cultural offering.

- A strong and inclusive economy.

Sandwell Valley Country Park is home a series of successful businesses and events that all contribute towards a strong local economy.

- A connected and accessible Sandwell.

Sandwell Valley Country Park is at the heart of the borough and is well connected by road and via public transport. Sandwell Valley Country Park also contributes to the following strategies:

- [Green Spaces Strategy](#)
- [Climate Change Strategy](#)
- [Local Plan](#)

National Policies

The management of Sandwell Valley must also be delivered within the context of national policies. These policies are wide ranging but include policy from the following organisations:

[Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs \(DEFRA\)](#)

DEFRA's aims are to tackle climate change through domestic action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to secure a healthy, resilient, productive and diverse natural environment. Many of these aims are achieved through Stewardship Schemes. Sandwell Valley has a Higher Level

Stewardship Agreement with Natural England to enhance the conservation value of grassland, woodland, hedgerows and fen habitats.

Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission is the Government department responsible for the protection and expansion of Britain's forests and woodlands. The West Midlands Regional Forestry Framework defines its aim as "to create a viable and inclusive woodland and forestry sector that maximises sustainable development through delivery of economic, environmental, cultural and social benefits to the people of the region".

Sandwell Valley's woodlands continue to be managed in ways that help realise these objectives.

Natural England

Sandwell Valley contributes towards Natural England's Urban Greenspace benchmark standards, which recommend that people living in towns and cities should have:

- An accessible natural green space, of at least two hectares in size, no more than 300 metres (5 minutes walk) from home
- Statutory Local Nature Reserves at a minimum level of one hectare per thousand population
- At least one accessible 20 hectare site within two kilometres of home; one accessible 100 hectare site within five kilometres of home; and one accessible 500 hectare site within ten kilometres of home

Sandwell Valley makes an important contribution to Natural England's targets on accessible natural green space in providing 260 hectares of accessible countryside.

Country Parks Renaissance

Sandwell Valley works towards meeting Natural England's recommendations for a country parks renaissance through:

- Participating in the Country Park Accreditation Scheme. (Sandwell Valley has been accredited since 2009)
- Identifying funding and income generation opportunities for Sandwell Valley

Single Data List

The Single Data List has been set by the Department of Communities and Local Government and are intended to be the only means of measuring national priorities that have been agreed by Government.

'160-00 Nature Conservation' measures the number of local sites in positive management. This refers to biodiversity and uses a formula to measure the way in which people manage local wildlife sites, which can be LNR's, SINC's or SLINC's.

The indicator will assess the proportion (%) of the total number of local sites under positive conservation management.

The countryside areas within the management remit of Sandwell Valley staff, score very highly with most sites actively managed for nature conservation.

Sandwell Valley - Current Assessment

Sandwell Valley is set in over 250 hectares of countryside that includes farmland, woodland and open water. The M5 runs through the centre of Sandwell Valley which also sits within densely populated urban area with 344,391 people living within 15 minutes drive.

As a destination, Sandwell Valley has a good catchment with 2,315,120 people living within 30 minutes drive and 3,887,662 within 45 minutes drive.

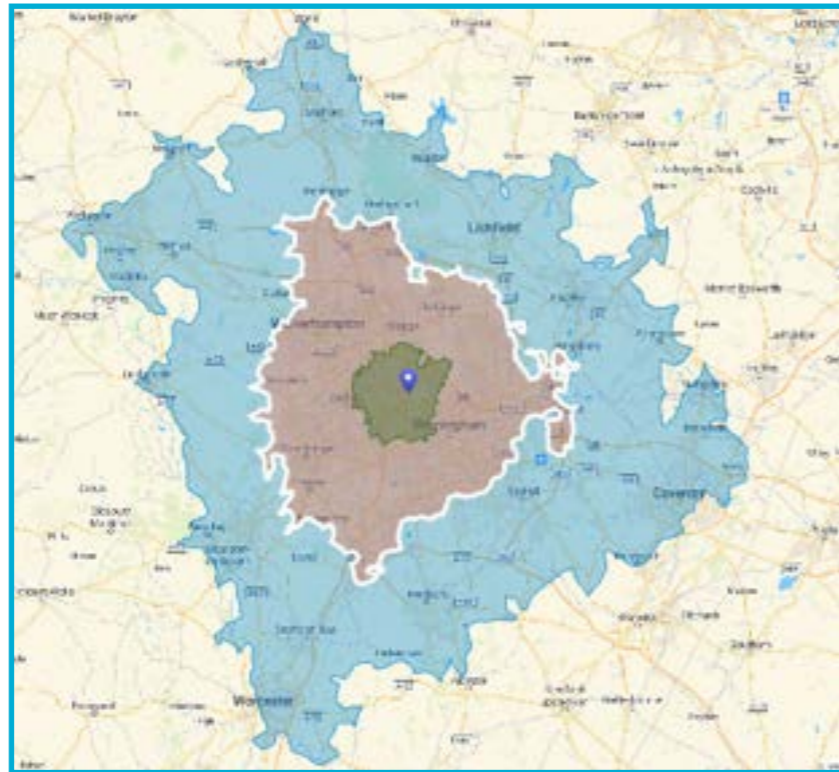
The Borough of Sandwell comprises six towns, which have their own distinct identities- West Bromwich, Smethwick, Oldbury, Tipton, Rowley Regis and Wednesbury. Sandwell is an ethnically diverse area with high levels of deprivation.

Activities

Sandwell Valley includes a diverse range of attractions and feature which includes Nature Reserves, Scheduled Monuments and Listed Structures. Dartmouth Park is a Green Flag park in it's own right, however for the purposes of this Master Plan and zoning activities, Dartmouth Park is referred to.

As a destination attraction, Sandwell Valley offers a wide range of activities and amenities which includes:

- Adventure Play
- Walking Trails
- Cycle Hire (not currently in operation)
- Farm Park
- Watersports
- Mini Golf and Footgolf
- High Ropes
- Rabbit Village
- Cycle Routes
- Events space
- Funfair
- Boating lake
- Sports Pitches
- Playgrounds
- Mountain Biking
- Viewing Tower
- Outdoor Gym
- Conference & Meeting Space
- Splashpad
- Parking
- Food and beverage outlets
- Toilets & Baby Change Facilities



Governance

Sandwell Valley is currently managed in-house with a range of concessions and tenant arrangements. This includes (but is not limited to) leases to Sandwell Valley Amusements & Adventure Golf, high ropes, cycle hire (currently vacant), and Sandwell Valley Sailing Club.

Visitor Numbers

Sandwell Valley has multiple points of entry, which makes it difficult to establish accurate visitor numbers.

Estimates of unique annual visits range from 90,000 to 500,000 per annum.

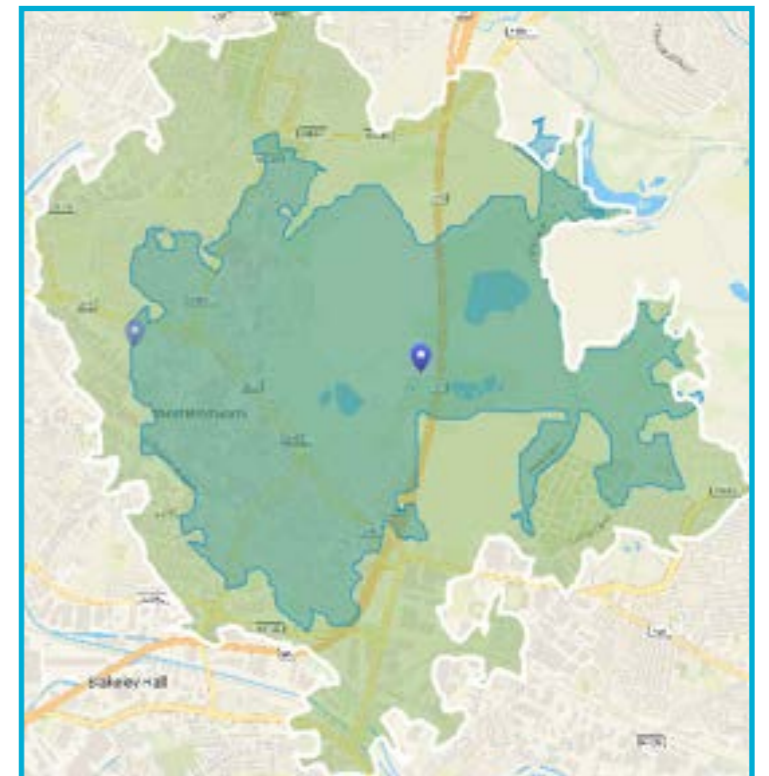
The ability to provide accurate and/or consistent measurement of visitors is essential to developing a sustainable master plan.

Local Catchment

A local catchment analysis (30 minute walk and 15 minute cycle) suggests that 28,326 people live within 15 minutes cycle and 11,123 within 30 minutes walk of Sandwell Valley Visitors Centre.

As the largest green space within the area, it is reasonable to assume that local residents will take advantage of Sandwell Valley.

The age of the local population is primarily people between 30 to 59 years of age, with 20% of the population 0-14 (significantly higher than the UK average)



Public Transport Links To Sandwell Valley

Sandwell Valley is somewhat isolated from major public transport routes. Ideally a bus route would connect Sandwell Valley Visitors Centre with the local community. The existing entrance to Sandwell Valley off Dagger's Lane and Salters Lane is two way and narrow.

In addition to this, the residential streets leading to the entrance are often filled with parked cars - transforming the two way road into pinch points.



Existing bus routes flow along Newton Road (Routes 5 16 & 46), Hallam Street, Segar Street and Lloyd Street (Routes 16,45,46,64 and 66) . The closest stops are highlighted in orange on the map below:



West Midlands Cycle Hire have a docking point at the Lloyd Street entrance to Dartmouth Park highlighted in blue on the map above. Entrances to Sandwell Valley are indicated with the diamond shape.

In addition the National Cycle Network Route 5 enters Sandwell Valley via the Europa Estate and through Priory Woods before continuing up towards Swan Pool and Forge Mill Farm.



A recent report by a traffic management consultancy identified that Sandwell Valley has more sustainable public transport links than other event venues. It also highlighted an opportunity for growth with increased capacity to the Metro network.

In summary, despite being a valuable local asset, Sandwell Valley (particularly the inner aspects of the park) is fairly disconnected. The majority of visitors will travel by car, however for residents without a car, or with mobility issues, options to get to Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, Swan Pool or Forge Mill Farm appear to be to cycle, taxi, minibus or take a bus to either Newton Road or Lloyd Street and make their way on foot/wheelchair etc.

Entry & Egress

The M5 partitions Sandwell Valley into two main vehicle access routes:

Salter's Lane

Salter's Lane provides the main entry into the West of Sandwell Valley, which is home to Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre and is the destination that 'Sandwell Country Park' brown signage direct visitors to.

The Salter's Lane entrance is shown in orange on this map:

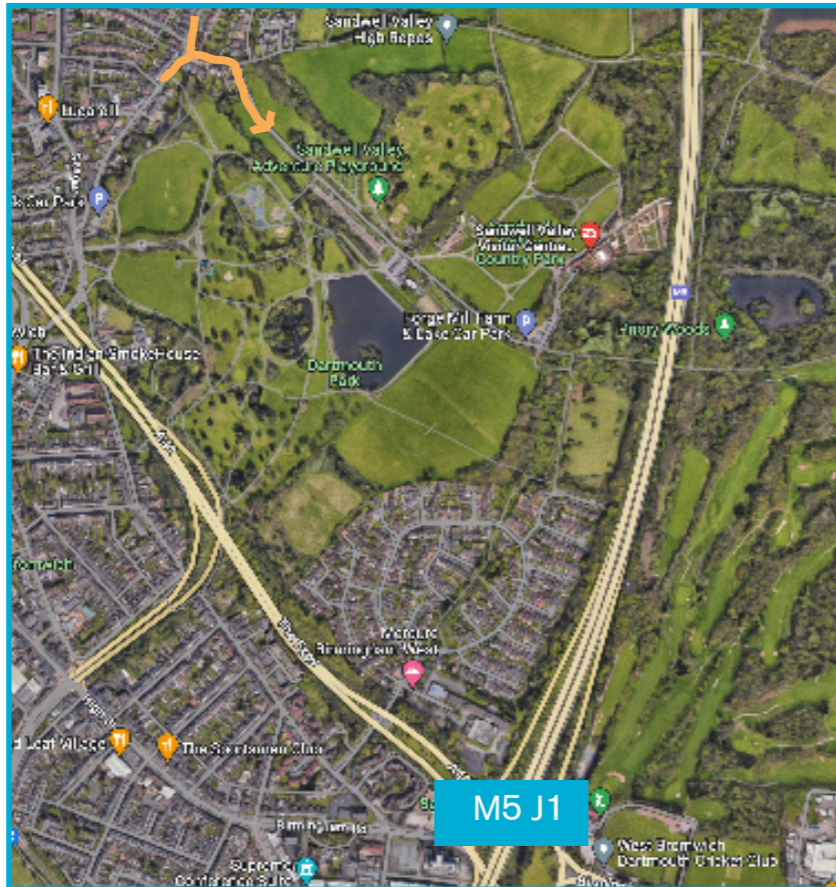
Salter's Lane is accessible via Dagger lane and a residential area with two way traffic.

Residents park on the side of the road creating a narrow entry and exit point for Sandwell Valley visitors.

This creates a challenge for both residents and visitors on busy days such as when events are being held.

The Salter's lane entrance into Sandwell Valley Country Park is gated and narrow. This presents a challenge for large vehicles exiting the Country Park as others are entering.

Once cars are within the grounds of Sandwell Valley Country Park, there is multiple parking options and locations.



Public traffic is unable to cross the M5 from the Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre side (West) to the Swan Pool side (East), however Sandwell Valley staff are allowed to cross with their vehicles.

Park Lane

Park Lane provides access to the East of Sandwell Valley Forge Mill Farm and Swan Pool. Forge Mill Lane is accessible from the North and South with connections off Newton Road to the North and Birmingham Road to the South.

Newton Road provides good connection to the North and South via the M6 and regional connections to Walsall and Birmingham.

Birmingham Road provides connection to the M5 which connects to the south.

Visitors have the option to park at Forge Mill Farm or at Swan Pool.

Forge Mill Farm is a working farm, but also a stand alone destination attraction as a farm park.

Swan Pool is home to Sandwell Valley Sailing Club and mountain bike tracks within Jubilee Woods.

The area is undergoing improvements with the addition of an urban bike park and new car park using redundant Environment Agency land owned by Birmingham Council

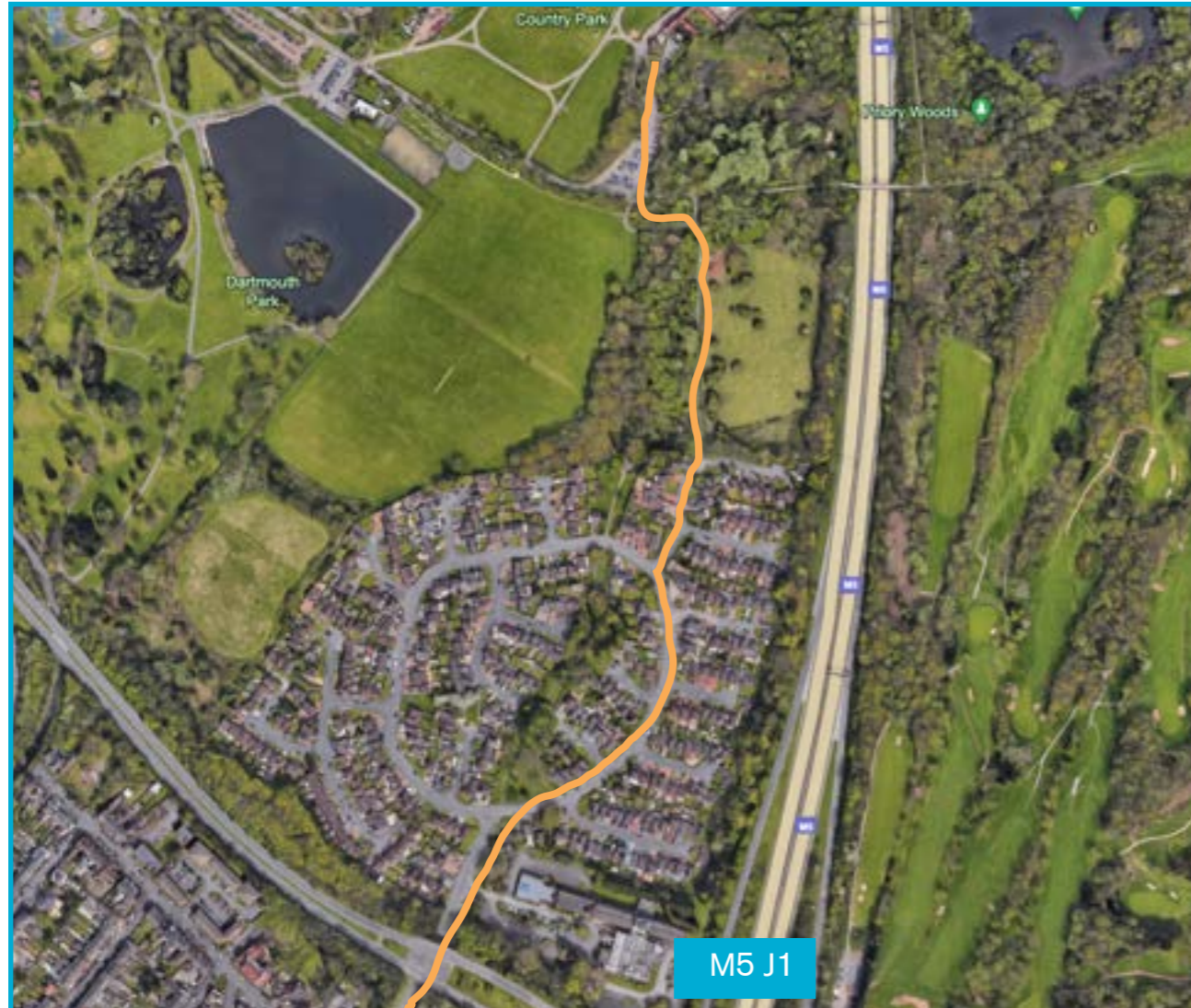
The Eastern section of Sandwell Valley is also home to Sandwell Valley Nature Reserve which is operated by RSPB.



Additional Access

During events and periods of high visitor numbers, an alternative access route via the Europa estate is utilised. This is either as an exit point for events or for staff and emergency access.

The route connects with Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre via the following route shown in orange:



The residential estate is well connected and links to the M5 junction 1.

Attractions - Activities

Sandwell Valley is home to a wide range of attractions mainly concentrated in the West side of the park.

Dartmouth Park is a popular and well-maintained formal park with a cafe, pavilion, play area (including splashpad), sports fields, meeting space, toilets/changing rooms and boating lake.

Funding has been used to provide a new community cafe within the existing pavilion, which is now open and growing its income.

Dartmouth Park is home to a 'Friends of Dartmouth Park' group, who regularly meet and arrange activities and volunteering sessions that help promote and maintain the park.

A sports pavilion and venue formerly used for bike hire and mini golf draws the eye on entrance via Salter's Lane.



The building is not aesthetically pleasing, particularly as a first impression of Sandwell Valley Country Park. The building is currently not in operation, but there are plans to commission a new operator from 2024 season.



However, a historical image shown in the bottom right corner of the image shows how a bit of activity can help transform the appearance of the building.

An adventure playground, high ropes and footgolf course and cafe are adjacent to this pavilion, in addition to a mini golf course and sand based pitch.

The pavilion serves the King George V playing fields, which are nearby.

A self contained fairground with supporting catering options operated on a concession is located adjacent to the Showground. This fairground provides rent to Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.



Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre is at the end of the Salter's Lane entrance road and is home to the Courtyard Kitchen, Victorian Gardens, shop and Rabbit Village. Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre was previously Sandwell Park Farm.

Due to modern animal welfare standards, the site is no longer suitable to house animals in the way that it did before Covid.

There is currently a programme of events in development to run every weekend from October 1st. There are also two annual event themes of Easter at the Valley and Santa at the Valley which are popular and bring in an income.



The Showground is located outside of Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre adjacent to the fairground.

The Showground and its associated event paddocks is a location for large scale events. It offers a full, facility event space attractive to large operators with a hard standing road vehicle route,

numerous event power points capable of sustaining major infrastructure, water and flexibility of space to create a wide variety of event and festivals set ups including multiple stages and zones, back stage and VIP areas, boneyards and camping options.

Swan Pool is an attractive body of water and home to Sandwell Valley Sailing Club. The sailing club are based within a large building that is surrounded by external boat storage.



The building looks derelict from the outside and has graffiti on its walls. The majority of the external boat storage area appears to be use to store boats no longer in use. There are signs of anti-social behaviour around the sailing club area with smashed glass, empty beer cans and canisters for laughing gas witnessed on site visits

Swan Pool has a walking route that extends around the water, and is home to a mountain bike course within Jubilee Woods.

An Urban Bike Track has been completed and opened officially in Nov 23 with funding from Sport England, Sandwell Council and Birmingham Council, with two zones adjacent to Swan Pool, and another across the road (Park lane).

There is a car park with approximately 150 car parking spaces and toilets (however these are closed to the public).

Forge Mill Farm is a visitor attraction and education facility that is open to the public as a farm park. Forge Mill Farm has a plan in place to become a centre of excellence for animal welfare and an education centre, in addition to being a visitor attraction.

Forge Mill Farm is particularly attractive to younger people, and does really well at attracting young visitors via the various events and trails that are delivered at the park. This has recently diversified into evening events and attracting the insta generation.

Attractions - Walking Routes

Sandwell Valley is home to numerous walking route and trails suitable for all abilities and occasions. Walking routes are supported by a series of interpretation boards and maps that help visitors



navigate and connect to/understand the nature and heritage.

Trail maps exist within interpretation boards and are made available to visitors. In addition, effort has been made via signage to help visitors understand how far, how long and how difficult (and accessible) routes are.

Whilst paths through wooded areas should reflect the natural environment additional maintenance is required in Priory Wood and Jubilee Woods.

Attractions - Cycling Routes

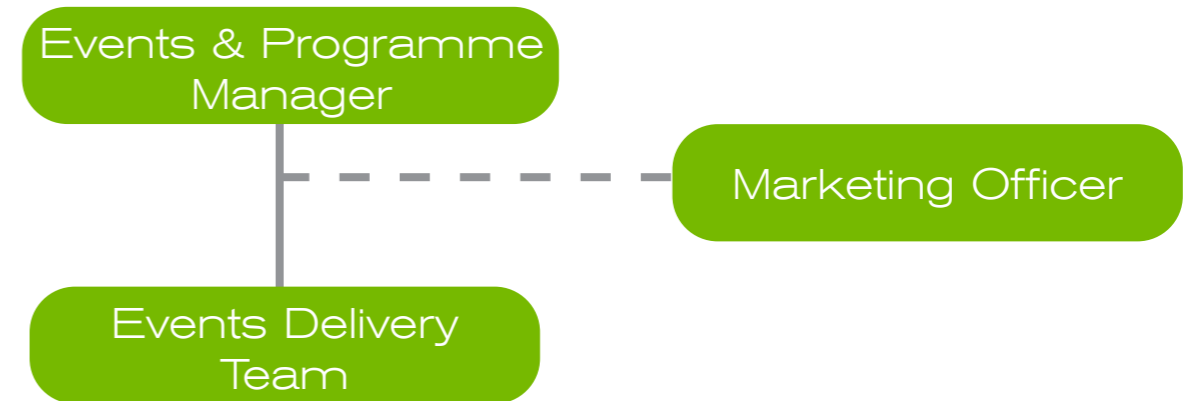
Sandwell Valley is a popular cycling destination and is connected via National Cycle Network Route 5. NCN 5 crosses the M5 on the southern pedestrian bridge and continues north west past Swan Pool to Forge Mill Farm.

NCN 5 links to the mountain bike routes at Jubilee Woods and will connect to the new Urban Bike Park.

In addition, multiple routes through the park are suitable for a range of bikes. Sandwell Valley is relatively flat, so is attractive for beginners.

Marketing & Market Placement

Marketing Sandwell Valley is essential to attracting new visitors and encouraging visitors to return all year round. It is our understanding that the Council is working towards the following marketing team structure:



Within a country park setting, events are essential to driving visitor numbers. It is clear that there is ambition and strategic drive both locally and within the leadership to deliver a high quality events programme.

As is common with this space, social media is the dominant marketing medium, however print and other media efforts do exist.

Recent effort has been made to tidy up the social media accounts since the marketing strategy was submitted in October/November 22, however it is clear that Forge Mill Farm still dominates the Sandwell Valley Country Park space (approximately 40% of posts on Sandwell Valley Country Park relate to Forge Mill Farm).

Whilst Forge Mill Farm is a core part of Sandwell Valley, it is capable of being established as a stand alone destination venue due to the strength of it's leader and content/activity that it delivers.

Sandwell Valley Country Park has the largest following (32k Facebook followers), which presents a good opportunity to promote activities within Sandwell Valley.

In addition, the Visit Sandwell page provides an addition layer of social media marketing, however this page has a broad scope beyond Sandwell Valley.

Sandwell Valley has recently launched two new distinct websites:

- www.sandwellvalley.com and www.forgemillfarm.com and currently updating all other sources and redirects to these sites.

Visit Sandwell includes a search function with filters for events, things to do and supporting amenities.

<https://www.visitsandwell.com>



The website format is similar to many across the UK. Developed by SimpleView, who specialise in this type of activity finder website. Visit Sandwell is the successor to Discover Sandwell. Discover Sandwell appears in places across the digital portfolio, with links taking visitors to the redirect page.

As with all finder websites, the usefulness/quality is in the content. This is where Visit Sandwell struggles. Filtering activities for 'Family' brings up a single location - 'Black Country Museum'. This suggests that the other 'family' friendly locations such as Forge Mill Farm Park have not been uploaded with the correct information to allow this filter to be applied.

A common problem with finders is ensuring that the most relevant items are shown. The primary use of Visit Sandwell is likely to provide inspiration to visitors and residents looking for something to do (days out). Visit Sandwell has multiple libraries and leisure centres on the list. Whilst this may be a popular choice for some, the sheer number on the finder means that more relevant locations and activities are pushed to the back across 25 pages of options.

The "searching for something" function within the purple bar isn't maximising the opportunity for highlighting activities, due to the restrictive format of the selection criteria it actually makes you think that there is very little happening in the borough:

- Selecting "Shopping" if no criteria is input, the 'catch all' only shows New Square West Bromwich, which indicates the Sandwell only has one shopping complex in the whole region.
- Selecting "Food & Drink", only lists 6 restaurants / pubs in the region.
- Selecting "Things To See & Do" produces 66 results, which is great, but there needs to be more structure to how these are presented, many of the early entries on the list are Leisure Centres. It is highly unlikely that tourists visiting the region will get to a leisure centre on their short break. So the priority in which these are listed needs correcting.

- Within the 'What's On' section there are a large range of activities listed which is excellent. On closer inspection however the vast majority are outside of the borough, with some in Coventry, Wolverhampton, mostly in Birmingham and even as far as Malvern Hills which is 1 hour away. To really highlight the range of activities in Sandwell this list needs presenting in a different way or refining to showcase Sandwell activities first.

This can be addressed by reviewing the filtering options, and refining/prioritising the most appropriate attractions. It is unclear if this is the case with Visit Sandwell, however some similar websites allow for paid promotions within the finder - ensuring that a particular activity or venue appears at the top of the list. This can be equally helpful and unhelpful, it is recommended that certain key locations are prioritised to bump them up the list.

Sandwell Valley appears on a series of third party websites which include options for visitors to place reviews.

At first glance, it is great that so many third party websites are promoting venues, events, tourism and activities within Sandwell. Unfortunately, the information included within these third party websites are often updated manually (without an API), resulting in a lot of information either being out of date or presented within a manner that does not give the best first impression.

Some sites also allow users to write reviews and upload images. These reviews are not currently being responded to consistently by the team.

The new marketing officer, the new websites, and the implementation of the marketing strategy will benefit the impact of events and activities and the general offer at Sandwell Valley.

As part of this master plan it is accepted that the following is either in place, or in progress:

- A permanent and commercially minded Marketing Manager has been recruited to take a lead on ensuring the Sandwell Valley offer is clearly communicated to visitors
- New websites for Sandwell Valley and Forge Mill Farm have now been launched (Dec 2023).
- Third party websites are updated and monitored/responded to consistently moving forward
- The Marketing Manager works closely with the events team to ensure that events are promoted with clear ticket sale targets issued
- The Visit Sandwell is either updated and maintained consistently or removed completely
- Social media pages are controlled by a marketing professional - with posts scheduled in advance and within pre-approved brand standards (access restricted)
- Social media pages limit what, where and when content is posted - for example keeping Forge Mill Farm content with the Forge Mill Farm page

Ticketing, Parking and Point of Sale Technology

Understanding who visitors are, where they have come from and why they have visited is essential to developing a thriving Country Park. The collection of data is therefore paramount to the future success of Sandwell Valley.

Sandwell Valley currently uses Ticketsource to facilitate event tickets and booking of activities. Ticketsource owns the customer data and does not link to venue point of sale system - preventing products (secondary sale) to be added to a ticket. This limits the revenue making opportunity of single events, and the ability to contact audiences regarding future programming.

Sandwell Valley has recently updated its point of sale technology which will provide valuable data as to what is sold, where and at what margin. The system includes an integrated stock control module which supports financial security and provides clear auditing lines.

Any upgrade to the ticketing system should consider the ability to integrate with this point of sale system. This will allow the two systems to work seamlessly and provide visitors with a complete experience.

Parking is managed by the Council and offers a wide range of parking options:

- Up to one hour - 40p
- Up to two hours - 80p
- Up to three hours - £1.20
- Up to four hours - £1.60
- All day - £2
- One year season ticket - £40

The parking meters use PaybyPhone to manage bookings via an app or over the phone. Users can also pay by cash, apart from in the Swan Pool car park, which only allows access via the app or phone.

Mobile internet signal is very limited at Swan Pool, and therefore customers are often forced to use the phone number, or run the risk. This was witnessed and experienced on a number of site visits.

As part of this master plan it is proposed that:

- Ticketsource is replaced with a system that gives the Council control over customer data
- The new ticket system should be compatible with the new EPOS/Website and allow 'bolt on' purchases for events (the ability to link a ticket to products)

Benchmarking Sandwell Valley

Country Parks across the UK have different offerings, facility mixes and features that make them unique. Benchmarking destinations on a like for like basis is therefore a challenge, however it is possible to review and benchmark destinations based on their ability to generate revenue, cost control, visitor numbers (albeit the quality of visitor data is questionable across the market), governance methods and the level of /variety of activity that is delivered.

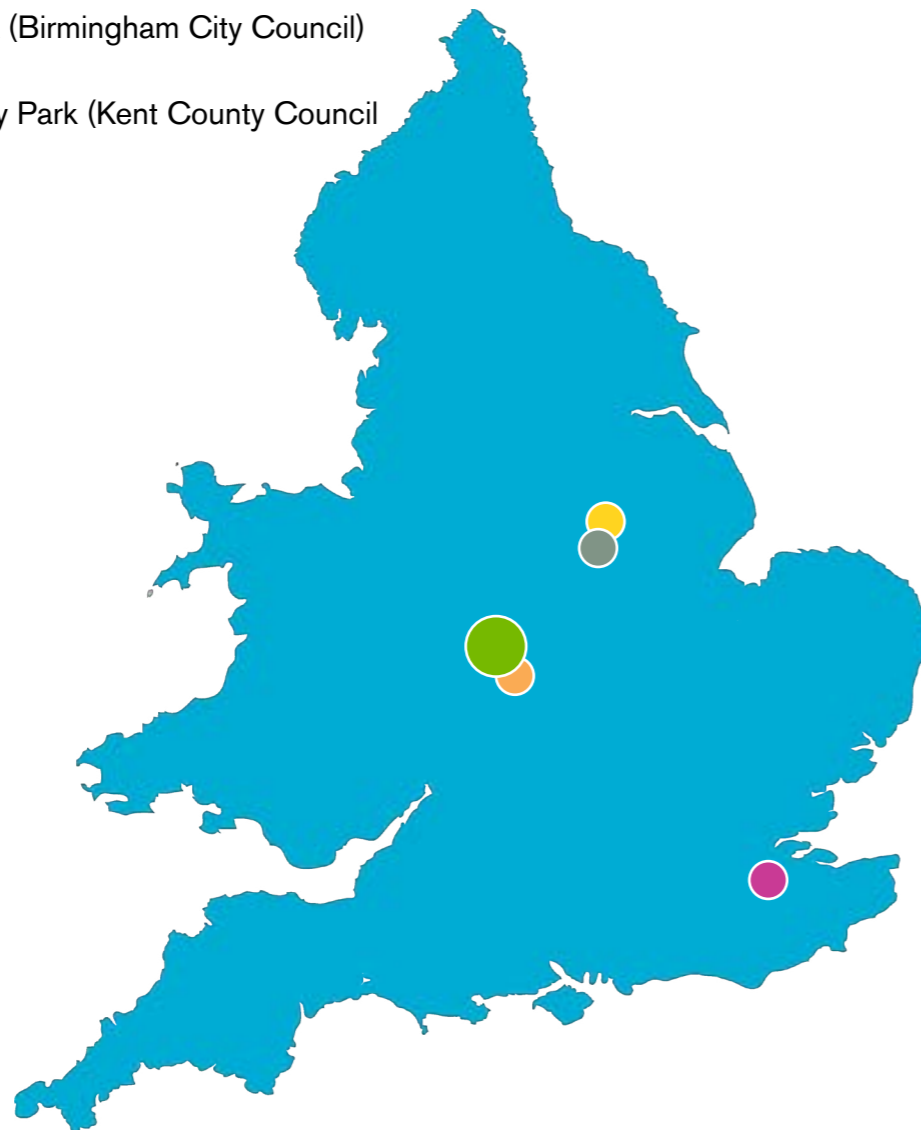
Two key benchmarks which we have intimate knowledge of are:

- Rufford Abbey Country Park (Nottingham County Council)
- Holme Pierrepont Country Park (Nottingham County Council)

To provide a more complete view, the following sites have also been reviewed:

- Lickey Hills Country Park (Birmingham City Council)
- Leybourne Lakes Country Park (Kent County Council)

- Sandwell Valley



Rufford Abbey Country Park

Rufford Abbey Country Park is owned by Nottinghamshire County Council with the management outsourced to Parkwood Leisure who operate under the trading name of Parkwood Outdoors. This management arrangement includes both the commercial activities and the green space/ ranger service.

Set in 150 acres of beautiful parkland, Rufford Abbey offers over 870 years of history, from its origins as a 12th century Cistercian monastery to its period as a Jacobean era family home. The park includes a nature reserve, lake, weir and formal gardens. The site has multiple stakeholders and stewards which include Historic England who monitor the Special Ancient Monument site.



The key operational challenge for Rufford Abbey was maximising the potential of the park during peak periods. The park has limited parking capacity of up to 1,000 cars (using overflow car parks - some of which have 28 or 90 day (Historic England Special Ancient Monument) restrictions on them).

The entrance and exit to the park is on a narrow, but busy road (as it is adjacent to Centre Parcs) with conflicts with local residents in relation to event/peak period parking (visitors block residential access with inconsiderate off site parking).

Visitor numbers were estimated at 350,000 per annum, however there was no consistent data collection method to confirm this number.

In addition, Rufford Abbey Country Park had an identity crisis. The site has two areas - the Rufford

Abbey end and the Rufford Mill end. Brown signage and other directional signage differentiated between the two causing confusion to visitors. A 25-30 minute walk between both ends of the provided connectivity issues, particularly within the context of very disjointed signage and information boards which had been installed in phases without consideration of each other.

To address these challenges which are not too dissimilar to those faced at Sandwell Valley, the park implemented a master plan which included the following improvements:

- Dedicated and signposted walking trails to direct visitors around the 150 acres (passing key catering and retail points)
- Interpretation boards along the trails with interactive check in features - engaging with the primary market (families)
- Car park space efficiency work to maximise capacity at peak periods - including reinforcing the suitability of overflow car parking areas (Included new car park machines - data capture)
- A themed adventure playground that explored the local heritage through interactive play - the largest in the local area (with supporting catering outlet)
- Rowing boats and pedalos for the hire on the lake
- A new archery range
- A dedicated ice cream parlour
- A refurbished retail area which focussed on children's gifts
- A new interactive museum area - explaining the Rufford Story
- Improvements to the cafés, restaurant to increase capacity and increase speed of service
- New historically themed mobile retail catering outlets at key locations around the park
- Investment into the gardens, including restoring an historical fountain to its former glory

- Refurbishment to the wedding venue



- Creation of the Orangery Garden Centre (within the historical Orangery)
The developments were supported by a schedule of seasonal and themed children trails (offering an affordable day out to parents), improvement marketing and a new events programme which included outdoor cinema in the summer and spectacle of light shows in the winter.

The impact of this work was an increase of 50,000 visitors per year to approximately 400,000 visitors per year (backed by the new data collection methods deployed) and importantly an approximate 35% increase in the average spend per visitor. For the Council, this turned a heavily subsidised asset into a cost neutral one.

Rufford Abbey has since consistently performed outstandingly on Visit England assessments, won multiple local and regional awards which include visitor attraction of the year and importantly remains a valuable local resource.

Holme Pierrepont Country Park

Holme Pierre Pont Country Park is home to The National Water Sports Centre and is set in a 270 acre Country Park on the outskirts of Nottingham. It is owned by Nottinghamshire County Council with input from Sport England and currently operated by Serco Leisure. Prior to implementing its master plan it had the following facilities:

- 2000m international standard regatta lake
- World class canoe slalom and rafting course
- 130 pitch camp site
- Meeting, Conference rooms & associated
- Activity Lakes (including water ski tow)
- 60 bed accommodation block
- Catering facilities

Prior to it's master plan, the site had an identify crisis, identifying simply as The National Watersports Centre, despite the 270 acres of attractive Country Park that surrounded the regatta lake and facilities.

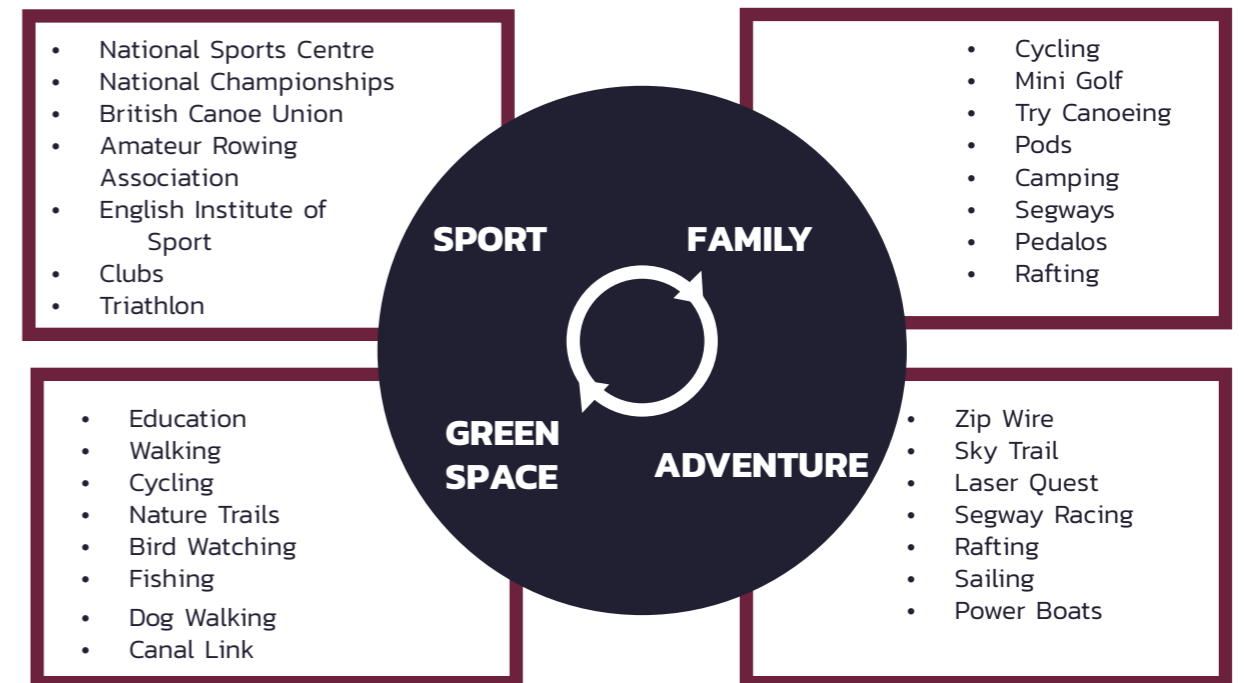
Potential visitors were highly unlikely to know there was a country park in the location due to the branding and related directional and brown signage for the site stating The National Watersports Centre. This was mirrored online and within marketing material.

Despite this, visitors in the know took advantage of the long walks, diverse ecology and scenic views.

Due to a need to provide a sustainable future for the park, a master plan backed by an investment strategy was agreed with the aim of bringing the park to a cost neutral position within four years.

The master plan split the park into four categories of focus - Sport, Family, Green Space and

Adventure. These four categories represented the four priorities identified from the site review, stakeholder engagement and industry trends/knowledge. The new activities that were delivered within each categories is shown below:



The master plan re-branded The National Watersports Centre as Holme Pierre Pont Country Park, Home of The National Watersports Centre. A map showing the new activities created within the park are shown below:



Master plan has allowed the park to meet its financial targets but also:

- Adapt staff culture towards a customer centric and commercial approach (rather than Elite Athlete focus)
- Opened up the park to a new audience - particularly popular with local residents and those travelling for an activities filled break
- The park is recognised as a family friendly venue particularly appealing to young audiences
- The events programme has now extended beyond sporting events to large scale non-sporting events



Lickey Hills Country Park

Located 10 miles south west of Birmingham, Lickey Hills Country Park is a 524 acre park operated by Birmingham City Council. The park offers a range of activities for visitors which include:

- Family days out
- Wildlife spotting
- Sporting activities
- School trips
- Dog walking
- Recreational walking

Lickey Hills has a Green Flag Award and is designated as a Country Park.

The Park has a visitor centre which is open from 10am to 5:50pm in the summer and 4:20pm in the winter. The visitor centre also acts as a gift shop.

There is a cafe (outsourced to an operator) which serves light snacks.

A popular point of interest for Lickey Hills Country Park is the view point at Beacon Hill. Beacon Hill rises to 297m above sea level, providing expansive views across the surrounding countryside - with views on a clear day extending to Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Wales.



The park also includes adventure play and connected golf courses.

Lickey Hills Country Park offers visitors a series of set walking routes of varying difficulty and distance which are built around the Park's attractions.

Ranger led activity is delivered within the park particularly for school groups. This centres around ecology, the environment and caring for local green space.



Lickey Hills Country Park welcomes 500,000 visitors per year serviced by 445 free car parking spaces spread over three car parks.

Recently the park tried to introduce parking charges as a way of funding improvements to the car parks but following public consultation it was decided that introducing parking charges was not appropriate at this time, give the financial pressures on residents.

The reasons for the proposed introduction of parking charges was:

- Visitors to the park will benefit from reinvestment of revenue from car park charging into the park for its ongoing upkeep and future works
- The three car parks serving the park will benefit from significant investment to address safety concerns and ensure they are fit for purpose
- Long-standing traffic management issues can be effectively managed and resolved. e.g. Warren Lane carriageway
- Improve accessibility by addition of formal disabled bays in the car parks
- The presence of enforcement officers can act as a visual deterrent which may deter any anti-social behaviour.
- Ability for the Parks Service to meet savings targets for 2019/20 and onwards.

The proposed parking charges were:

- Up to 1 hour 50p
- Up to 4 hours £2.20
- All Day (4 hours +) £3.30
- Annual Season Ticket - £52
- Blue Badge Holder - FREE

Leybourne Lakes Country Park

Leybourne Lakes Country Park was created in 2004 and is a popular 230 acre Country Park featuring multiple lakes, habitats, wildflower meadows, hedgerows and scrub. The park offers a wild variety of activities for visitors which include:

- Walking trails
- Children’s play area
- Fishing
- Cafe
- Watersports Centre



The Watersports Centre is a new addition, completed in September 2022. A watersports offering existed prior to the opening of the watersports centre, however this was delivered from a series of temporary containers and structures.

The new watersports included a cafe and function area, decking for outdoor seating, toilets and changing rooms to service visitors and those taking part in water based activities.

The building was designed with sustainability in mind with energy savings features integrated throughout. This has reduced the overall operating costs providing a long-term sustainable operation.

Since opening the watersports centre has welcomed 60,000 visitors in the first 9 months.

The building is operated by the local leisure trust TM Active who have helped make the operation a success.

This has included catering for all of Leybourne Lakes Country Park users with the sale of ice cream and dog treats.

Watersports activities include:

- Canoeing & Kayaking
- Scuba Diving
- Windsurfing
- Open Water Swimming
- Stand Up Paddleboarding

The prominent new building combined with a cafe and public toilets for the Country Park has helped open up the watersport activities to a wider audience.

Birthday parties, and functions can be delivered from the centre, which provides a spectacular backdrop.



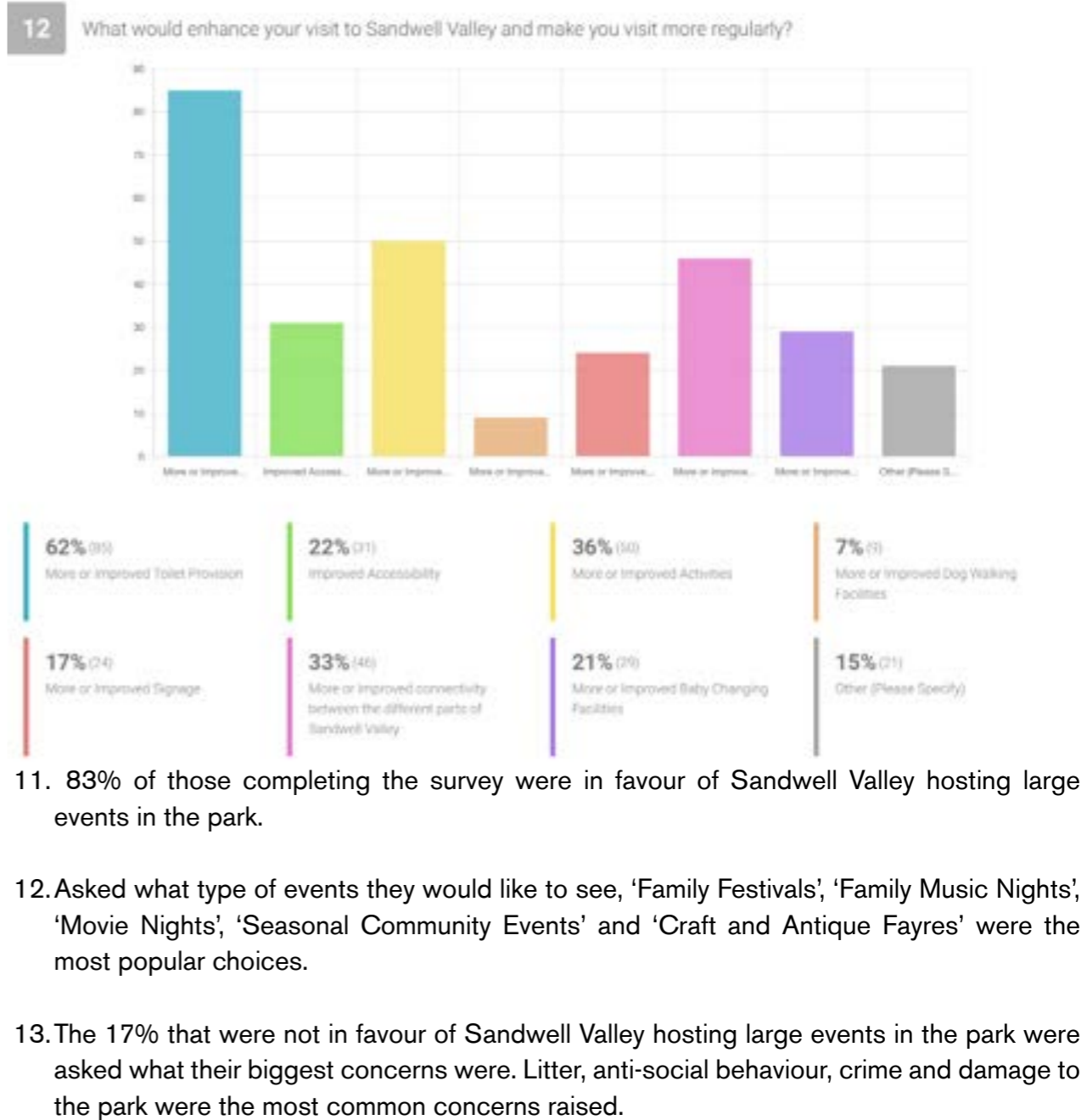
Visitor Survey

Consumer Survey

From February to April 2023, an online visitor survey was open, this was published on social media channels, utilised paid social media and was promoted via a direct mail campaign that was delivered to over 3,000 local residents, providing a QR code link to the survey.

The aim of the survey was to provide some insight into what visitors think of Sandwell Valley Country Park, and what improvements they would like to see. The survey received 147 responses, and provided the following insights.

1. Of those who completed the survey, 65% lived in Sandwell, 35% were from outside the borough.
2. 91% had visited Sandwell Valley in the past 12 months.
3. Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre was the most popular attraction, followed by Dartmouth Park, Forge Mill Farm and the Adventure Playground.
4. Some of those who responded had attended events in the past 12 months, including the Pumpkin picking at Forge Mill Farm, Christmas Grotto and Bank Holiday Car Boot Sale.
5. 79% of those travelled by car, 8% used public transport, only 2% cycled.
6. Of those attending by car only 31% experienced traffic issues on entry - 82% of these respondents suggested that these issues were related to delays waiting for a car park space.
7. 66% of visitors travelling by car experienced issues on exit.
8. 48% of those experiencing issues on exit suggested that this was related to delays getting out of the car park, and 43% attributed this to getting out of the park itself.
9. 39% of visitors stayed 1-2 hours on average, with 35% staying 2-3 hours.
10. Asked what could enhance their visit, the most popular response was 'more or improved toilet provision', with more or improved activities and increased connectivity between the different part of the park also being popular responses. Some of the more individual responses included 'better online information' and 'more food and drink places'.



Gaps & Opportunities

To become financially sustainable and successful, country parks need to be able to maximise the peak periods of operation (school holidays and weekends), whilst retaining the ability to attract a steady flow of visitors, with minimal operational overheads during off peak periods.

It is important to address the most important challenges for Sandwell Valley (these are the same for all country parks) which are:

1. **Entry and egress during peak periods** (and the impact of that on the local road network/community)
2. **Parking capacity and location to attractions** (generally the majority of visitors will travel by car)
3. **Connectivity** (How easy it is to move around the country park, both in terms of quality of footpath/cycle path and signage)
4. **Data Collection and Management** (How visitor data is collected, managed and applied to improving visitor experience and informing improvements)

All of these aspects link together to provide the backbone of any master planning strategy.

Entry and egress during peak periods

There will always be big differences in visitor numbers depending on time of year, weather and/or activity or event that is being held on any given day. Having an efficient and flexible approach to managing these variables is essential to the success of the business plan. If visitors experience difficulty entering or exiting the park, this will influence any future decision to visit.

Supporting the entry and egress of visitors is an essential part of the master plan, and links to many different thread of the overall vision. These include:

- Improvements to parking capacity, availability, signposting and sustainability.
- Improved connectivity between areas of Sandwell Valley encouraging visitors to park in different part of the park.
- Improvements in the way customers are communicated to and with, including the ways they book events and activities in advance. For example booking specific time slots to spread visitors out throughout the day.
- Data collection and management - collecting and analysing data to improve the visitor experience and directly improve visitor operations.

Congestion on entry can lead to congestion and queues at key commercial points within the park. This is likely to reduce visitor satisfaction and decrease the likelihood of a repeat visit.

Parking capacity and location to attractions

Increasing car park capacity is not always feasible and is often leads to a reduction in attractiveness of a park. However simple sustainable measures can be taken to improve parking capacity. These include:

- Ensuring that parking bays are clearly designated - this can be achieved by re-painting existing lines, or for overflow car parks on grass or grasscrete marking out bays with logs or stakes to encourage responsible parking.
- Signposting visitors the car park that best suits their visit. This can start online if a visitor books an activity, they are recommended to park in a specific car park. Additionally, car parks should be signposted with the option to indicate if they are full or not at busy periods (using sliding signs or marshals to support this).
- Installing ground protection measures to extend the life of overflow car parks on grass.
- Where necessary (and in support of a sustainable business plan) improve water drainage in overflow car park areas to reduce the impact of wet days ruining a season.

Connectivity

Sandwell Valley covers a vast area and visiting the entire site in a day is beyond the majority of visitors (who will spend 1-2 hours visiting). Therefore, making efforts to:

- Reduce the travel time between areas or clearly signpost the time and distance between areas.
- Create 'days out' or experiences that last 1-2 hours within different areas of Sandwell Valley centred around key entry points/car parks and refreshment/toilet areas.
- Clearly signpost areas and their suitability for visitors based on the most common activities within each area, the accessibility (both in terms of disability access and terrain difficulty etc).

For example, an active visitor who is visiting to exercise followed by a hot beverage may be encouraged to park at Swan Pool and walk to Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre for their refreshments before returning to their car at Swan Pool. This helps reduce congestion at the main entrance and spread visitors out across the park - contributing to improved visitor satisfaction.

Data Collection and Management

Having control of customer data will provide invaluable insights to the management team, allowing them to make informed, visitor centric decisions. A country park will always have peak and off-peak periods, and a lot of the strategy will be around maximising the opportunity at peak periods. Understanding how often and when visitors attend, how long they stay and how much they spend will help the team plan in advance and prepare a schedule of events and activities that are targeted for the audience. Parking, booking and spend data is essential, and can be achieved through an integrated approach.

Vision - The Master Plan

The following vision for Sandwell Valley represents a strategy to address existing challenges, improve connectivity, achieve local and national priorities and ensure a sustainable future for Sandwell Valley.

To help visualise the master plan, Sandwell Valley has been split into distinct zones as outlined in the image below:

- Zone 1: Dartmouth Park
- Zone 2: Pavilion, Adventure Play & Activities
- Zone 3: Showground & Fairground
- Zone 4: Sandwell Valley Country Park & Priory Woods
- Zone 5: Swan Pool, Jubilee Woods & Urban Bike Track
- Zone 6: Forge Mill Farm



Zone 1 – Dartmouth Park

Dartmouth Park is a well-maintained Grade II listed park which has recently undergone a £6m restoration project that was supported by Heritage Lottery Fund and BIG lottery.

There is a range of activities for visitors including a play area, ornamental lakes, playing fields, outdoor gym equipment, floral displays, sensory garden and community pavilion with viewing tower and premium event spaces.



Investment into the pavilion has now provided a new café area for the park, which opened in June 2023

Dartmouth Park hosts large public events such as firework displays and is accessible from multiple points around its perimeter. Car parking is available at Sandwell Valley Country Park and off Lloyd Street.

For larger events, park and ride arrangements are used, with the local Tesco Extra recently providing the parking spaces.

The park also benefits from public transport connections along Seagar Street and Reform Street.

The Friends of Dartmouth Park are key stakeholders who meet regularly at the Pavilion building, and quarterly with the Assistant Director and Cabinet Member.



Vision

The vision for Dartmouth Park is to ensure that it is kept to a high standard of upkeep with visitors to all zones of Sandwell Valley fully aware of what is on offer at Dartmouth Park via clear directional signage and park maps.

Whilst Dartmouth Park hosts events, and will continue to do so, its primary function is as a valuable outdoor recreation area for residents. With a rich heritage, it is important that the story of Dartmouth Park is communicated clearly to visitors.

To support the overall sustainability of the park, it is recommended that a close relationship is continued with the 'Friends of Dartmouth Park' group.



Volunteers should continue to be supported to help enhance the appearance of Dartmouth Park and work to maintain and improve accessibility to all areas, and communicate the heritage to residents and visitors.

There are areas within Dartmouth Park that are particularly dark, creating a hazards during events. Currently the park deploys additional measures such as temporary floodlighting systems which come at a cost.

Consideration should be given to providing a permanent solution that will increase safety and save money in the long term.

In summary, this master plan recommends the following improvements within Dartmouth Park:

1. Improved signage that links to the other areas of Sandwell Valley.
2. Installation of cycle points to help connect to the rest of the park.



Zone 2 – Pavilion & Adventure Play

The Pavilion provides a first impression for visitors entering Sandwell Valley Country Park. The building is aesthetically tired, the toilet facilities are functional, and service Zone 2 and those accessing/exiting Zone 1.

Mini golf, outdoor gym and AstroTurf pitch facilities are adjacent to Pavilion which also provides changing facilities for sporting activities on King George V Playing Fields.

The Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. To provide a aesthetic facelift to the existing building, exploring renewable energy options to boost sustainability
2. Replace the sand based pitch by working with the Council's Leisure department to place a bid for a Football Foundation Playzone Area (these areas are suitable for multiple sports and are highly durable)



3. Update the mini-golf course or upgrade to adventure golf
4. Re-instate cycle hire, and include e-bike charge points at the Pavilion - it is recommended that a single operator is appointed (or this is delivered in house) to manage cycle hire, and outdoor activities across Sandwell Valley)
5. Update signage and trails that clearly visualise how the zone links to the rest of the park (this should include other cycle/e-bike hire and drop off points)

These improvements will help create a positive first impression, provide a valuable additional income and help connect visitors to the whole of Sandwell Valley.



Zone 3 – The Showground & Fairground

The showground and events space is currently home to Sandwell Valley Amusements, a Junior Funfair, and large event fields. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council have an ambition to establish Sandwell Valley as the home of regional and sub-regional events.

To help achieve this ambition the showground area needs to be maintained and supported to deliver such events. Large scale events attract larger volumes of traffic to Sandwell Valley. Should the Council wish to deliver events for over the current capacity of 19,999 guests, further feasibility work would need to be commissioned to explore what would be required to deliver this.

The Fairground concession is currently due for renewal, this provides a regular rent payment to the Council. There is some question as to if this type of activity is appropriate for Sandwell Valley, and if the catering aspect conflicts with the other Council operated catering outlets.

The Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. The fairground offering is re-tendered when the current contract expires in 2024, with the requirement for the successful operator to ensure that the catering offer does not conflict with the Council's own offer (prices and scope).
2. Signage is updated to reflect the new developments surrounding Zone 3
3. Efforts are made to increase and extend the life of overflow and event car parking capacity by ensuring bays are marked (to improve efficiency of parking) and grass protection material is used (particularly on main routes in and out of car parks)
4. A long term solution to access and egress is explored which provides a more efficient flow of traffic

Addressing the access and egress challenge at Sandwell Valley would benefit the overall sustainability and long term viability of the destination. As the population of Sandwell and surrounding areas grows, the connectivity of Sandwell Valley is likely to be tested. The current entrance/exit via Salter's Lane is very residential, with traffic management measures required at peak periods and events.

Creating an access/exit that avoids residential streets / or is more directly connected to major roads such as the A41, Newton Road, Birmingham Road, M5 and M6 is a more sustainable approach in the long-term.

King George V Playing Field in particular provides excellent overflow/event parking capacity. In addition the Europa Estate exit option is close by, allowing cars to exit Sandwell Valley with a more direct route to the M5/A41.



Zone 4 – Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre & Priory Woods

The recently re-branded Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre (Formerly Sandwell Park Farm) is a key area of focus for this master plan as there is the opportunity to re-establish its identity and purpose since the animals were transferred to Forge Mill Farm.

The location of the Visitor Centre is at the end of the road, which passes car parks that are next to Zones 1 and 2. Should a visitor park in the car parks along the entrance road, the visitor centre is still a fair distance away, with visitors passing the adventure playground and various activities along the way.

To ensure that the Visitor Centre is utilised to its full potential, the Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. Zone Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre with Priory Woods and the heritage within the woods (The Sand Well, Priory Ruins Priory Hall, Ice House etc).
2. Redevelop the internal space to cater for weddings and events which utilise the impressive architecture (including converting and upgrading the current staff toilets to be suitable for public use).
3. Provide a major year-round attraction at Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre via a new 'Heritage Discovery Zone' primarily targeting a young family audience, school groups and people with disabilities. This area to be serviced by a new café with internal and external seating.
4. Provide a new toilet and baby changing area to service the Heritage Discovery Zone.
5. Provide clear and concise signage and interpretation boards that are suitable for families and a younger audience.
6. Deliver a year-round trail events that explore the surrounding routes and heritage.
7. Update signage and branding around the park, and externally to signpost visitors to the visitor centre.
8. Provide a connectivity map which details routes around Sandwell Valley, with walk and cycle times and difficulty of terrain.

These improvements will ensure Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre is a central focal point and connectivity hub of Sandwell Valley.



All improvement recommendations have been developed with the purpose of enhancing the heritage will need to be delivered delicately working in partnership with the local conservation and planning team.

The history and heritage of Sandwell Valley can be communicated from Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre. Linking Priory Wood, Priory Ruins and Sand Well via clearly communicated and accessible trails starting and ending at Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre can provide visitors with a free activity packed full of fresh air, exercise, ecology and local heritage.

All of the infrastructure for this already exists, it just requires updating and upgrading to be suitable for the primary market (Families) and integrated into the events (seasonal trails) programme.



This can be achieved by updating interpretation boards and signage across the zone to provide consistency of message. These boards can be future proofed by integrating QR codes which link to content that can be updated when required.

Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre is currently underutilised and lacks a clear purpose / place within the customer journey of Sandwell Valley.

Previously a Farm Park, the location now hosts a Rabbit Village This Rabbit Village is located in the Victorian Walled Gardens, disconnected from the reception and shop.

The Green Houses (mistakenly viewed as historical, but put in place in the 1980s) have recently had funding to:

- Remove the Green House from the right hand corner of the Victorian Garden, creating an event ready space, particularly for weddings and premium events.
- Restore the Green House in the far right hand corner, for use as part of the education and outreach programme to continue maintaining the Victorian Gardens.

Compact Tea Rooms are located at the rear of the main building, they are not the most accessible but have access to an attractive outside space.

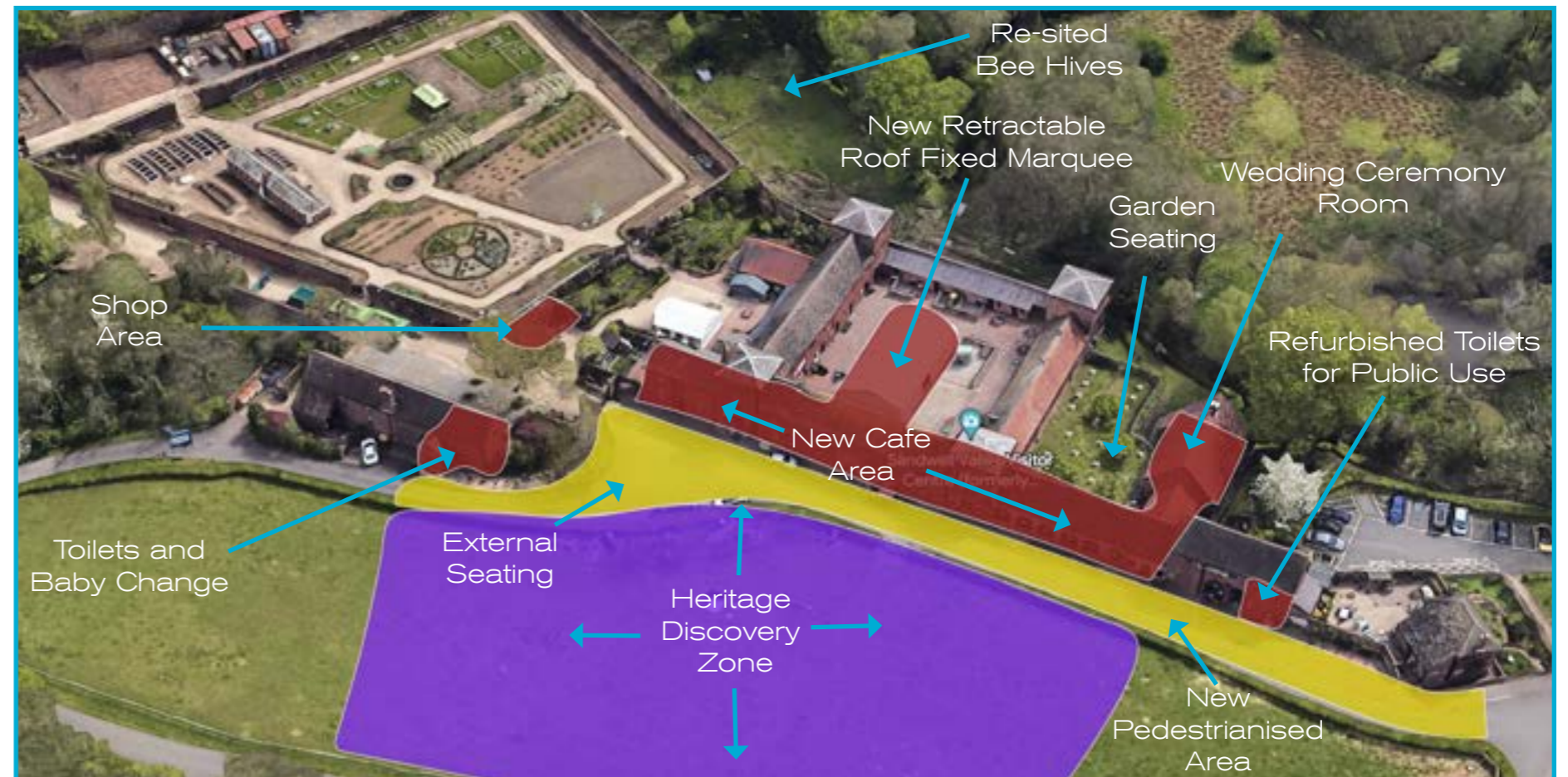
The recommended improvements aim to provide year-round use and reasons to visit and revisit. The proposed improvements are shown on the map and include:

- Pedestrianised (bikes allowed) area with bike parking and E-bike charging points immediately in front of Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre
- Heritage Discovery Zone on the existing paddock outside of Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre (Helping to connect young people and people with disabilities with the heritage)
- Converting part of an existing building to deliver new toilets and baby change facilities to support the Heritage Discovery Zone
- New Cafe area which when the barn doors are open will connect directly to a new external seating area and the Heritage Discovery Zone
- New retractable roof Marquee fixed within the courtyard area - to support events and increase the number of cafe covers

- Internal cafe seating area
- Wedding Ceremony Room utilising the existing shop area
- Access to a new garden area (where the bee hives currently are) with seating / use for wedding photos / welcome drinks
- New shop area, converting the concession stand outside the tea rooms
- Bee Hives to be removed or relocated to the rear of the building (monitor suitability of this location against risk of stings with the public)

In addition to these improvements, all signposted trails and cycle routes will connect to the front of Sandwell Valley Visitor centre. This will place Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre at the heart of Sandwell Valley.

This revised facility mix will attract year-round visitors and support (and weatherproof) small and large weddings and events.



Heritage Discovery Zone

The primary purpose of the Heritage Discovery Zone (HDZ) is to provide Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre with a year-round attraction. The HDZ targets children under 8 and those living with disabilities, providing an accessible educational play experience. The HDZ will be developed working in partnership with heritage consultants however the initial ideas of how this could look is outlined below:



The main play structure could mirror Sandwell Hall, and/or Sandwell Priory.



Bringing key parts of local heritage together via interactive and engaging play such as this water play feature concept which was inspired by the original Sand Well.



Providing substantial accessible play equipment and features will help attract local people living with disabilities and disability groups from across the West Midlands.

A key market will be school groups who will combine ecological and historical tours of Priory Woods/the surrounding area with educational play. The play area will reinforce what they have learnt on their tours and provide lasting experiences.

It is important to aim for a 'best in class' HDZ. This will help draw visitors from far away.

The area will work well with the existing adventure play in Zone 2 as the Zone 2 area is more suitable to older children.



Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre Internal Areas

The ability to flex the operational delivery of assets is key to financial sustainability within destination attractions. It is common for 80% of annual revenue to be achieved within the peak periods of the year (weekends and school holiday periods). The biggest on-cost to any operation is staffing, therefore the proposed developments have been delivered with the aim of reducing the base level of staffing requirements during the off peak periods, whilst providing the ability to process large volume during the peak periods.

The proposed revised layout is shown below:

Creating a new cafe area within a space currently used for storage will help connect Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre to visitors by opening up the large barn doors into the newly pedestrianised area.

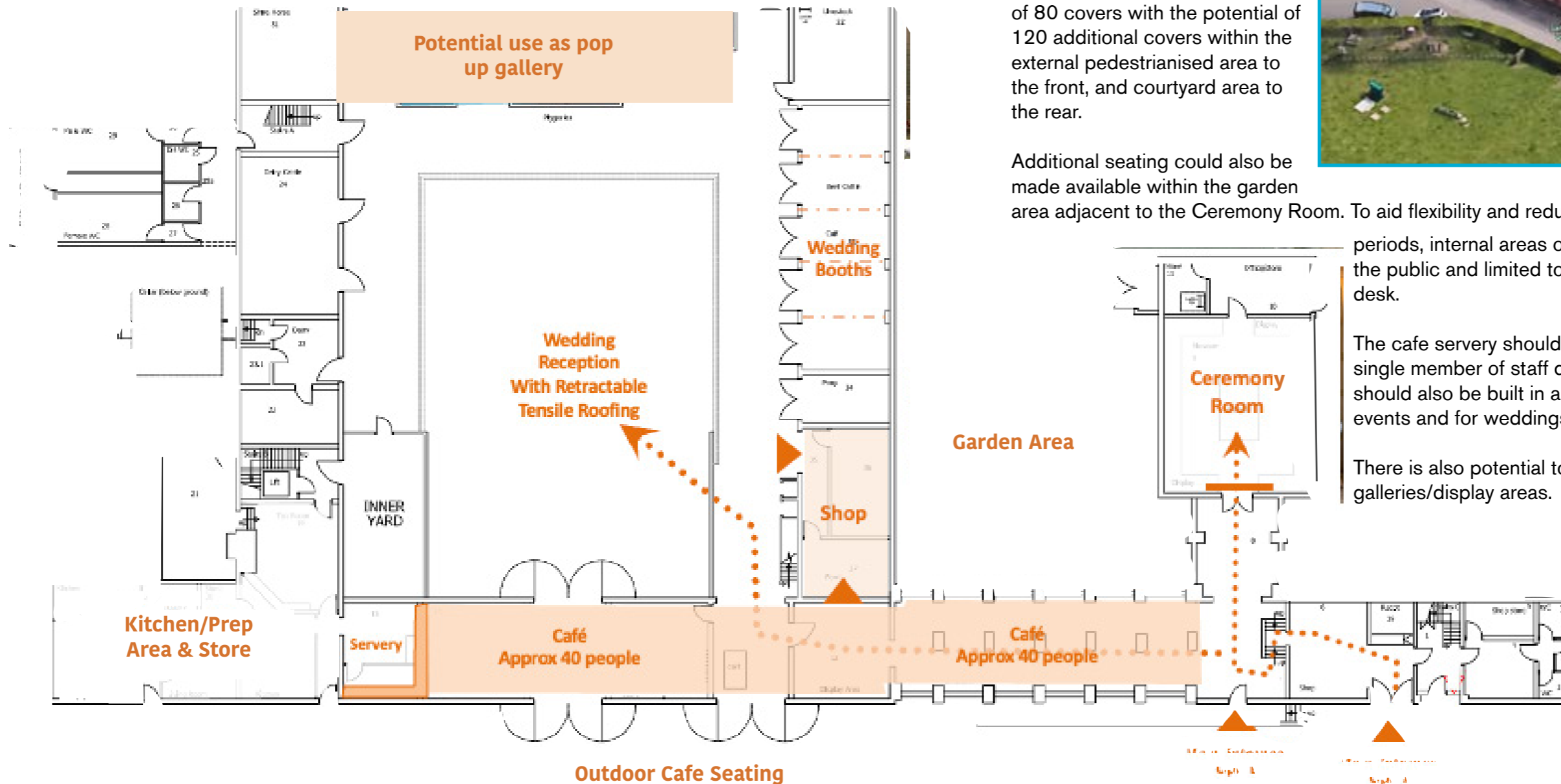
The cafe could extend internally (without) breaking through existing walls into the long room to the right and into the courtyard area behind another set of large barn doors.

This will provide internal seating of 80 covers with the potential of 120 additional covers within the external pedestrianised area to the front, and courtyard area to the rear.

Additional seating could also be made available within the garden area adjacent to the Ceremony Room. To aid flexibility and reduce overheads during off peak periods, internal areas of the cafe could be closed off to the public and limited to those areas closes to the cafe desk.

The cafe servery should set up to allow operation by a single member of staff during off-peak periods. The cafe should also be built in a way as to act as a bar during events and for weddings.

There is also potential to use other areas for pop up galleries/display areas.



The space has been designed to support the delivery of medium to large weddings and events. Key to the all-year-round delivery of events and weddings is the proposed retractable roof within the courtyard space.



As with the image above, the roof will be respectful to the heritage location, and not be connected to the main building. It will require connection with the ground, and therefore careful consideration of this must be made and discussed with the heritage consultant prior to submitting planning permission.

The original cobbled floor will be retained with temporary event flooring used (that levels the floor whilst protecting the cobbles) for events and weddings.

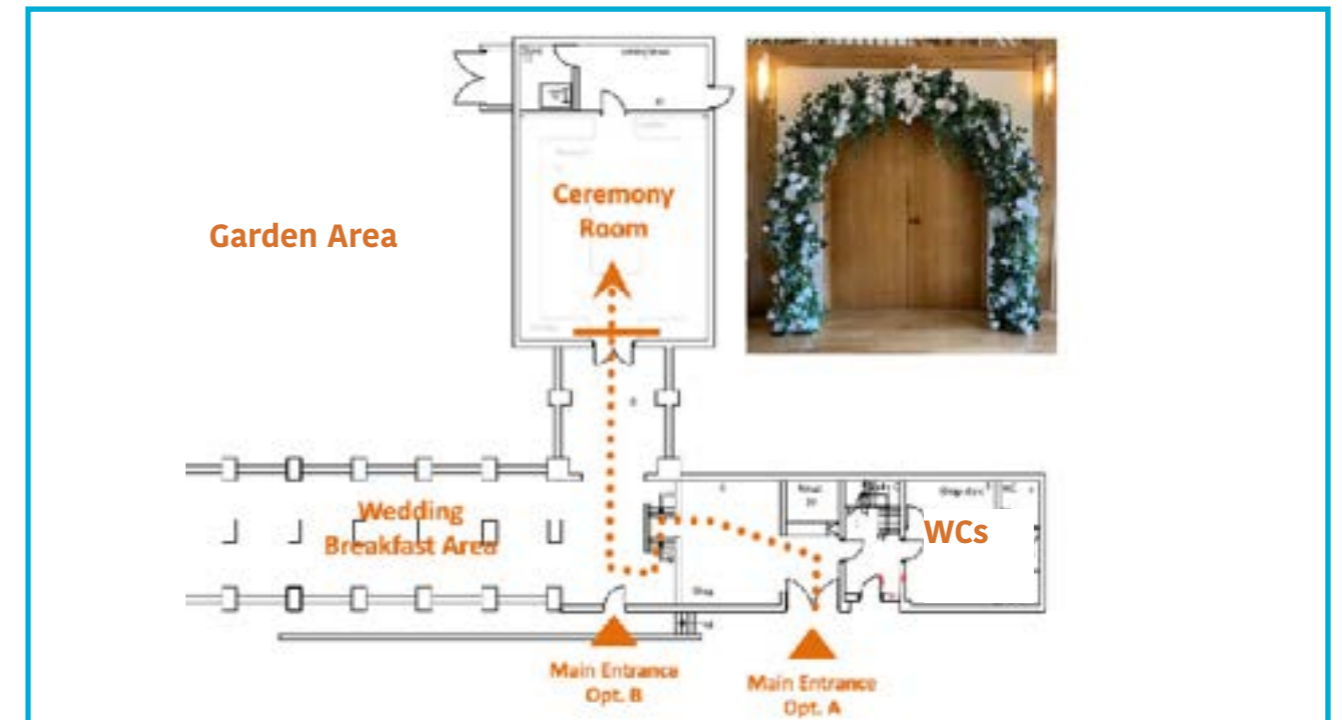
The venue currently uses marquees to support one off events as shown in the Google Earth image here:

Having a permanent fixture will reduce costs in the long term whilst providing a year-round use of the courtyard area for a range of events and occasions.

Unlike the image, the retractable roof will connect the building to the courtyard via a rubber flap - providing a weather resistant link between the two areas.



Wedding ceremonies will be conducted in the new Ceremony Room with entry into the room outlined below:



Photographs can be taken in the garden area which currently houses the bee hives. These hives will be relocated to a safer/more appropriate area.

The new space allows for weddings of differing sizes to be delivered. Wedding breakfasts can be delivered in the long room closest to the Ceremony Room or within the courtyard under the marquee.

The existing stables within the courtyard will be provided with power where possible to allow for wedding activity booths and pop up stores.

External caterers will be able to make use of the kitchen area which will support the cafe, either as a prep area for pre-prepared food, or as a full kitchen to deliver event and wedding catering directly.

The shop will be relocated to a new prominent position of Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, which will be linked via new walking trails and routes through Sandwell Valley.



Zone 5 – Swan Pool

With the development of the Urban Bike Park, Swan Pool is preparing to welcome a large audience. This anticipated increase in footfall, growing building replacement liability (Existing Sailing Club) and the ambition of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council to provide a sustainable Sandwell Valley has led to the following Master Plan proposals for this area:

1. Replace the sailing club with a new café and water sports centre
2. Extend the existing car park and create a one way entrance and exit (to improve access and egress)
3. Update signage and interpretation boards – linked to the new developments
4. Link the urban bike park to the new café area by installing bike parking
5. Install e-bike charging points and cycle hire space (linked to the Pavilion cycle hire in Zone 2)
6. Install a land train that connects Swan Pool to Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre and Forge Mill Farm

The combination of these recommendations provides a sustainable destination attraction within Sandwell Valley. The connectivity of Zone 5 is currently better than Zone 4 due to access via Park Lane onto Newton Road (which leads to the M6) to the North and Birmingham Road (which leads to the M5) to the South.

Zone 5 is also connected by pedestrian (and internal traffic) bridge over the M5 to the Western section of Sandwell Valley and to the National Cycle Network via Route 5 which run through the site.

This connectivity provides an opportunity to establish Zone 5 as a regional and sub-regional destination attraction, with a key focus on watersports and cycling. Setting aside watersports and cycling, the location as a stand alone destination is attractive to visitors looking for a walk around Swan Pool or through the woods. Whilst the M5 can be heard in the background, the location provides a peaceful and visually stunning location which is a perfect location for those looking to escape a urban landscape and reconnect with nature.

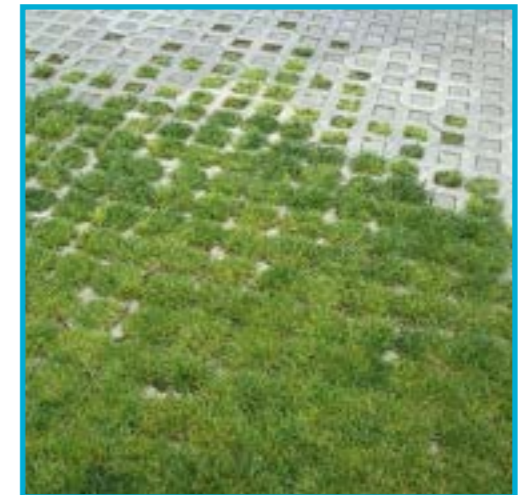
When complete, the site plan of Zone 5 is shown here. Zone 5 is connected by walking and cycle path to Zones 4 and 6. A new land train (peak periods), cycle hire and E-bike chargers will also help boost connectivity between zones.



Key to driving the success of Zone 5 is ensuring that parking arrangements are suitable for the potential of the area.

To ensure that this is the case, it is proposed that the site where the existing sailing club is located should be converted into an overflow parking area for bikes and cars utilising grasscrete or similar to create a more natural looking feel.

In addition to adequate parking, ensuring a clean flow of traffic in and out of the Zone is important. To aid this, we recommend creating a one-way entrance only and exit. The new cafe and watersports centre will become an activity hub for Zone 6. Providing much needed catering, toilet facilities and an improved watersports offering.



The initial design is outlined below:

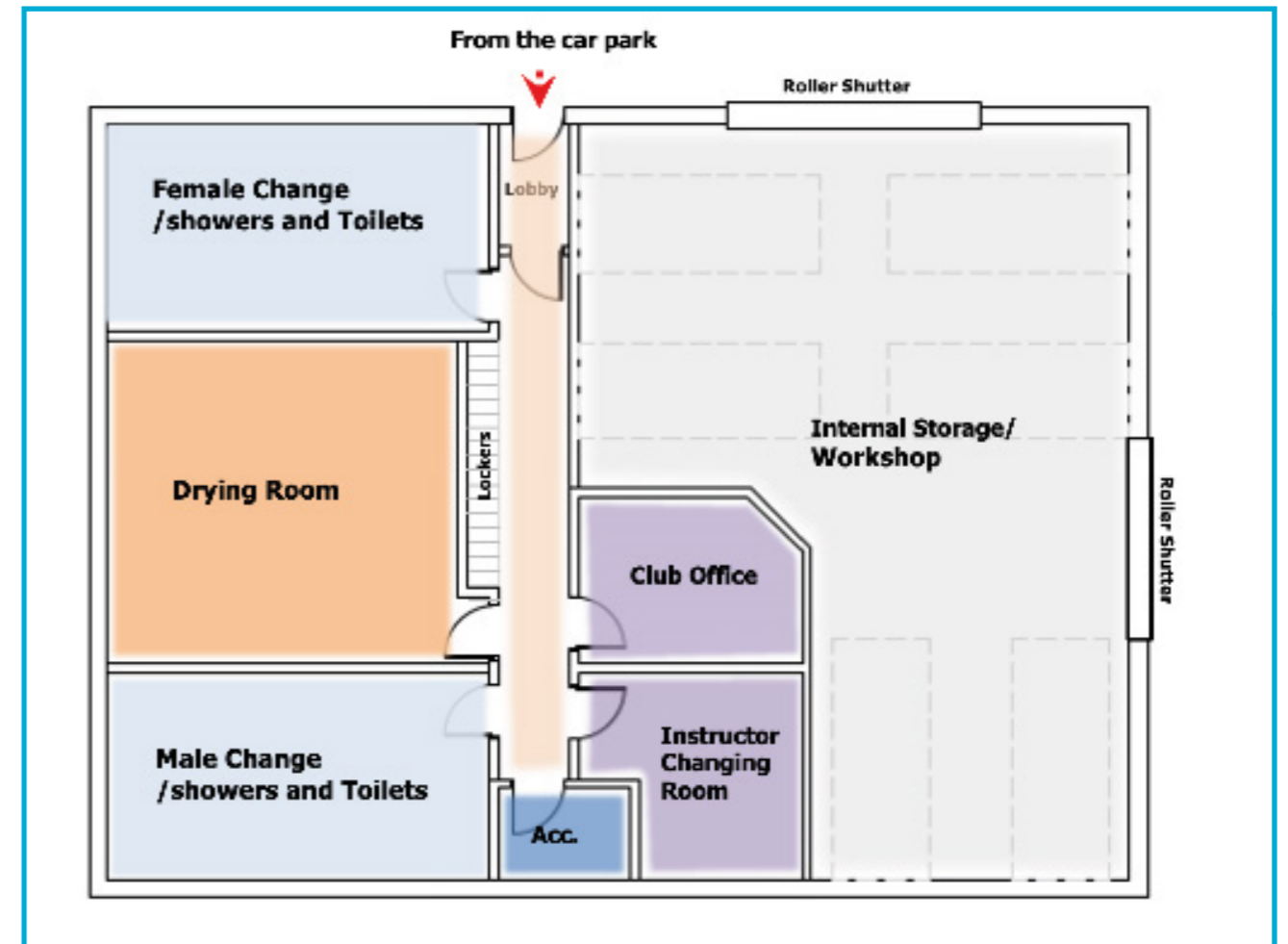


The water facing element (ground floor) will open up onto pathway, with seating extending onto a decked area. Customers will be able to enter to use the cafe or be served via a hatch.

The rear view shows the watersports centre entrance (lower ground floor) which will be home to the sailing club and include a drying room, changing rooms and a workshop/safety talk area.



The draft layout for the watersports area is shown below. The watersports centre will be fully accessible, and include a staff changing area.



Boats and larger equipment will be stored externally either in the existing area of the yard that is used, and/or within new containers which can be stored immediately outside of the centre.

It is anticipated that the area immediately outside of the centre could also house a container used to support the cycle hire service which would operate across Sandwell Valley. This would allow customers to hire a bike or similar piece of equipment in Zone 2 and drop it off in Zone 5 (or vice-versa).

It is anticipated that the watersports centre will deliver/support a full range of watersports activities such as:

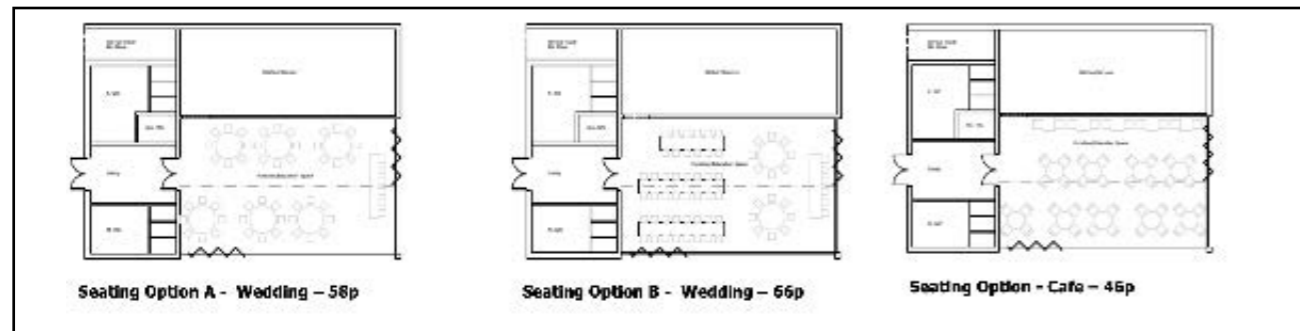
- Sailing
- Stand up paddleboarding
- Kayaking

- Canoeing
- Raft building
- Outdoor swimming



The proposed venue will blend in with the natural environment, with glazing providing stunning views over the water. The internal design of the cafe/function room space suggests space for 50 seated guests, with access to the external area via sliding doors where there will be additional covers providing a seated capacity of approximately 80.

The primary purpose of cafe/function room space will be to service visitors to Swan Pool during peak periods. Use of the function space will be for Sandwell Valley Sailing Club, room hire and weddings. There are various seating layout options for weddings which give an indication of the space within the venue.



It is anticipated that the venue will have a kitchen and bar on site, allowing food to be prepared on-site and drinks to be served.

The site currently has some challenges with anti-social behaviour. It is anticipated that the addition of this cafe/watersports centre will improve overall security by providing increase supervision all year round.

The introduction of an Urban Bike Track combined with the existing cycling connectivity (via NCN Route 5) and the mountain bike tracks through Jubilee Woods will transform Zone 5 into a regional destination attraction.

To ensure that the potential of this areas is realised, all directional signage and interpretation boards should be updated to reflect the anticipated target audience. This would include placing estimated cycle times between key locations and cycle hubs/network routes.

Concerns were raised around the flood risk within the area selected for the building. Measures to counter this risk have been included within the design and costing work that has been completed.

Zone 6 – Forge Mill Farm

Forge Mill Farm is visitor attraction and education facility that is open to the public as a farm park. Forge Mill has recently undergone developments to improve its customer journey with further improvements planned to add a play barn, demonstration barn, cafe and education facilities with investment of around £1.5m.

Forge Mill is particularly attractive to younger people, and does really well at attracting young visitors via the various events and trails that are delivered at the park.

The current diversification initiatives at Forge Mill Farm are transforming the Farm's into a stand alone and popular destination venue.

The venue currently has a passionate and driven leader who has been supported to deliver meaningful change.

The Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. Proceed with the new education area / kitchen and display barn
2. Complete and launch the new play barn
3. Redevelop the shop area to ensure that the visitor journey ends in the shop
4. Install E-bike points to link Forge Mill Farm to the rest of Sandwell Valley
5. Update signage and interpretation boards to reflect the developments
6. Ensure that the new Land Train stops at Forge Mill Farm
7. Explore Overflow Parking on the adjacent fields

Key to the success of any visitor attraction is ensuring that visitors leave satisfied that they have received value for money. Measuring dwell time is a common key performance indicator used within visitor attractions.

The development of the farm trail at Forge Mill Farm has extended the dwell time, however it is currently possible to complete a visit in less than an hour.

Visitors should not be rushed around the attraction, and they should not be on site for too long either. A sweet spot for a customer visit is a 60-90 minute dwell time. This gives visitors enough time to feel like they have received great value for money whilst also increases the likelihood that they will take advantage of the refreshments available on site. A 90 minute visit also allows for regular turnover within the car park, allowing more visitors to attend each day, with an increased spend per visit.



The effectiveness of this can be monitored through the ticket and car park data. Based on this data, Forge Mill Farm could then confidently adapt and flex its advance ticket sales to include timeslots with pre-determined capacity that relate to the car parking spaces and the overall visitor capacity of the farm. This approach will help ensure an even flow of customers throughout the day, allowing the Council to ensure that the standard of visit is consistent throughout the day.

Planned developments such as the play and display barn will contribute to increasing the overall dwell time at Forge Mill Farm.

To further enhance the customer experience, developing a fit for purpose display barn is recommended. Display barns are highly popular within other farm parks, providing additional income through the selling of experiences in addition to providing reasons for visitors to attend such as during lambing season (a peak period of interest within farm parks).

To support the educational activities at Forge Mill, it a food barn and fit for purpose education centre is also recommended. Reviewing locations the most economically viable option is to combine the display barn, which can also used to host specific events with the food barn and education centre by re-purposing and extending an existing barn.

Initial designs and layouts are shown in the following images:

The proposed location is shown here:

The re-purposing of the existing barn allows a smooth customer journey to be maintained and will reduce build cost by utilising existing foundations and utility connections.



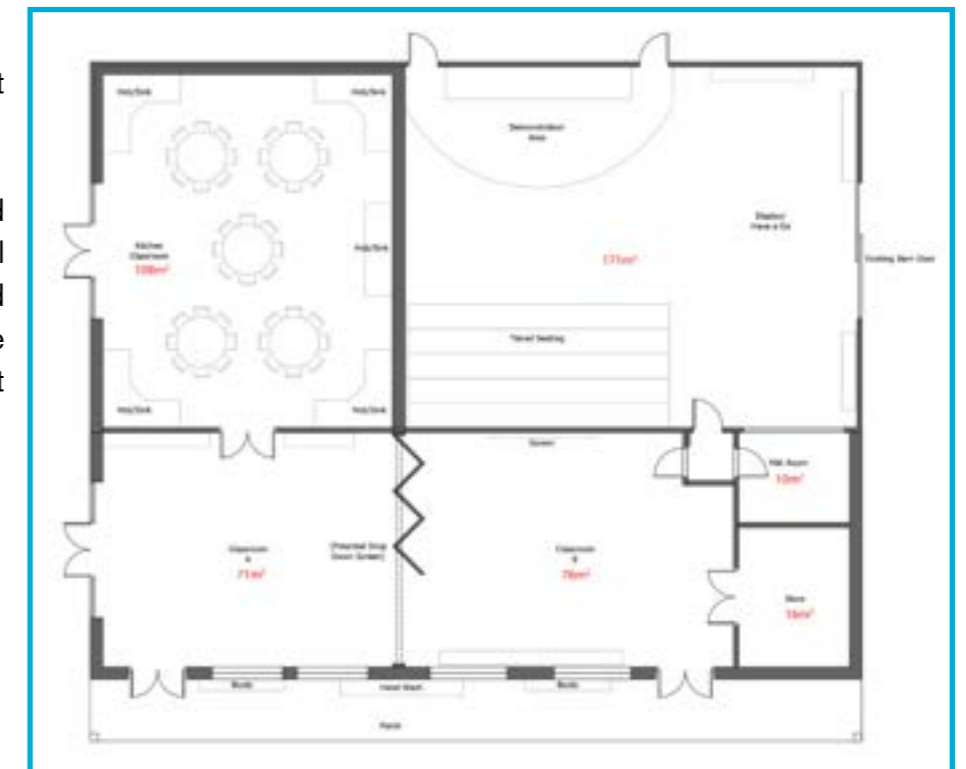
In addition, the building is the first to be seen on the journey (after the ticket hall), therefore



will provide a great first impression for visitors.

The two classrooms and a kitchen classroom will provide a year-round asset to support the educational activities at Forge Mill Farm.

Having a pre-defined customer journey that passes key refreshment areas and ends within a shop area is common practice within visitor attractions. The redevelopment/re-organisation of the shop area will allow for a more defined journey.



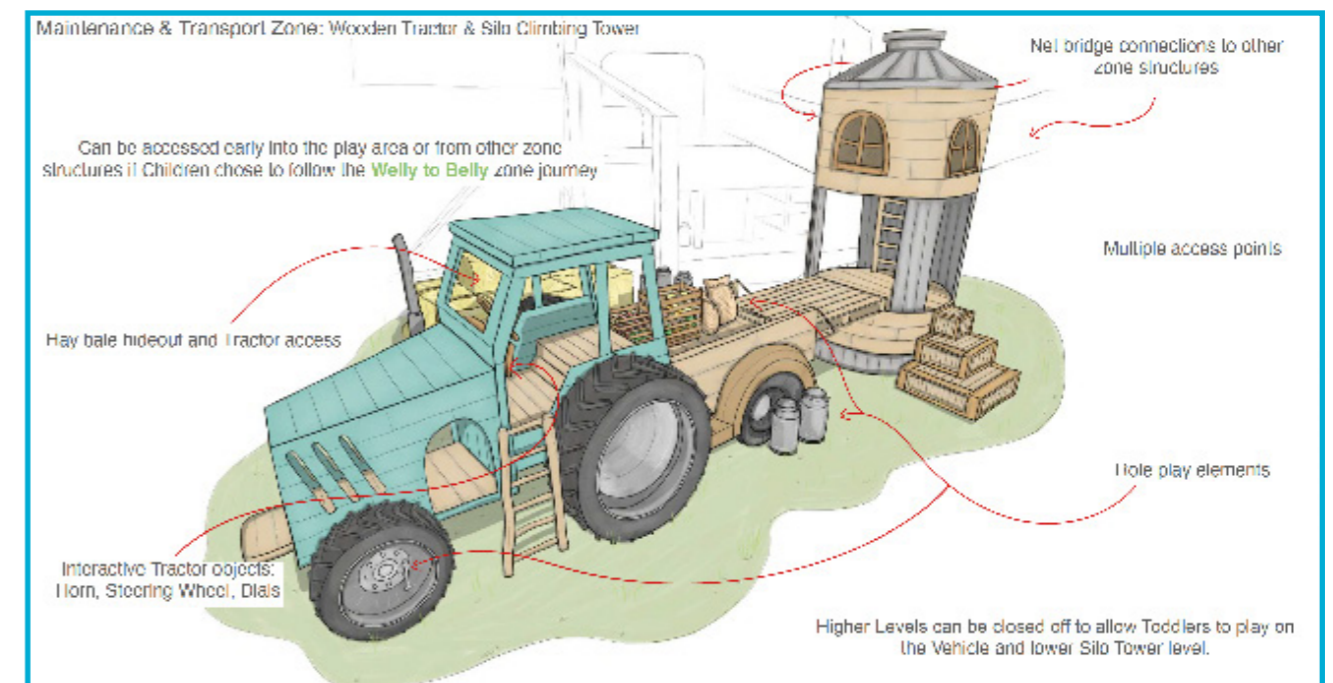
Combined with refurbishing the toilet area and the new display barn, food barn and education centre this will completely transform the first impression that visitors experience.

This approach will contribute to extending the visitor dwell time to within 60-90 minutes and increasing spend per visitor.

The new play barn combines indoor play with a cafe and party room. This provides a good additional revenue point for the attraction, increases the dwell time and overall spend per visit. The play barn will keep the farming theme, allowing children to



continue to learn about the animals and farm life through play.



King George V Playing Fields General Parking and Overflow Parking Areas

King George V Playing Fields is currently used for overflow parking, with parking meters already installed. The Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. Create grass protection routes for parking – with the aim of preserving the ground condition and extending the use of the area into as much of the peaks periods of between April to October.
2. Provide power, water and drainage (if possible) to support large scale outdoor (marquee) weddings in this area

For all of the highlighted areas the Master Plan proposals for this area are:

1. Improvements to drainage be made where possible/practical
2. Ground protection mats are deployed during events for the traffic routes to ensure that the area recovers quicker and maintains the ability to function as an overflow car park or camping area
3. If camping is going to be a regular occurrence, ensure that the area is linked with water (blue pipe to a stand tap)
4. For the Forge Mill overflow parking area it is recommend that parking meters are installed to service the area. Precedent for this has been established at King George V Playing Fields



Major Events - Feasibility

Input from Sandwell Events Team and The Event's People

There is significant opportunity to enhance the events offer at Sandwell Valley with a programme of major events. The site is currently under used for this purpose and as the events industry recovers from the affects of Covid-19 there is significant opportunity in this area, as providers are looking for new spaces and opportunities.

A traffic management study has shown that the venue is one of the most accessible in the region in terms of connectivity, close to major road networks and public transport hubs that are seeing increased capacity (eg the Metro line through West Bromwich).

Major events are place makers, particularly for venues seeking to establish as sub-regional destinations. Many come with national acclaim and put venues on the map across the country. The income generated from major events and festivals is not only significant to the venue, but to the local economy. As the industry looks to improve its sustainability, there is a clear trajectory towards using local suppliers and investing locally, while event goers continue to spend off site in the immediate area while travelling to and from events. Sandwell does not currently have any major multi day events. These bring in large income boosts to the accommodation sector by increasing local bed nights. There is capacity within local accommodation to facilitate increased bed nights for major festivals.

There were 141.5 million visits to outdoor events in 2018, with a total on-site and off-site spend of £39.5bn. Through incomes earned at events and elsewhere, this contributed £30.4bn in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the UK economy, and provided 589,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

(Value of Outdoor Events 2018, Bournemouth University and the Event Industry Forum)

In addition, it has been identified that the neighbouring Greater Birmingham and Solihull area has the potential to attract £210m-£390 million in GVA (creating 4,700-9,000 jobs) with an increased cultural offer focusing on events and festivals. This is partly due to the Central Birmingham area having a saturation of events with a limited number of large outdoor venues.

The event site at Sandwell is exceptionally well resourced in terms of infrastructure, hard-standing and power in particular. There are established 10k and 5k running routes that can be extended to a half marathon as well as Swan Pool which is suited to Triathlon swimming and hosted a high quality Swim England junior championship each year, The Showground and western Valley are currently limited by a lack of drainage and by grass field parking. This reduces the amount of events the land can hold as it needs time for recovery, reseeding and repair between events – and this can be for extended periods during wet months.

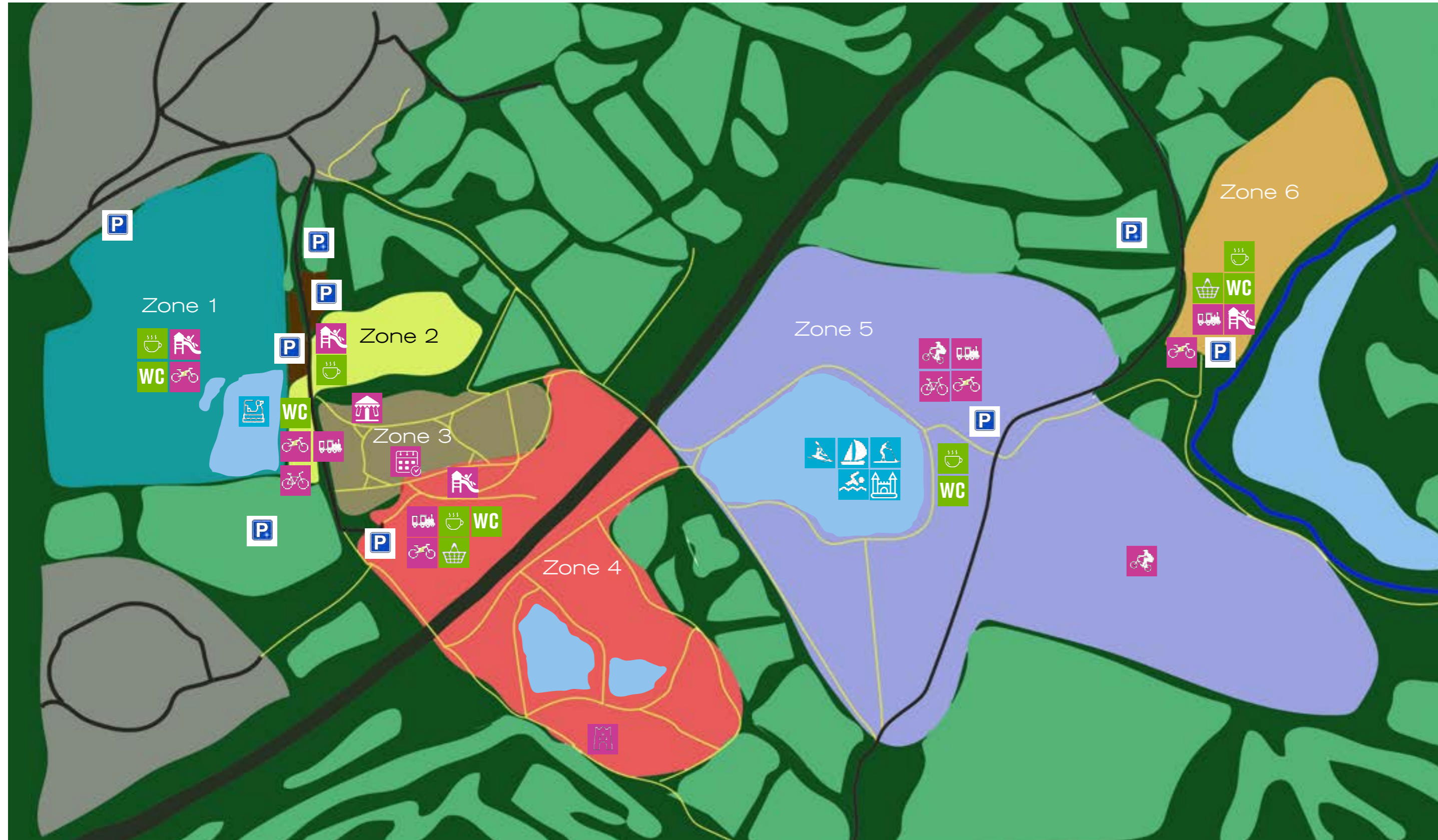
Improvements to these areas, would give the site the ability to hold 12 or more major events a year with an audience capacity of 19,999 a day. Recent traffic management consultancy work has demonstrated that the local road network could manage this level of use with the current ingress/egress and road networks. Traffic management plans have been drawn up by event

size which can be implemented depending on the size of the event. Conversations have taken place with local transport operators who are able to increase capacity on networks to facilitate large audiences and clear plans are now in place for traffic and parking management around local residential areas.

There are currently funding opportunities around 1. Restarting the events industry, providing post Commonwealth Games legacy and 2. Improving sustainability around events. There is also a push for national sporting and arts organisations to spread their pound outside of the capital. Arts Council England are highly supportive of events in the Sandwell area and have invested significantly in two large scale events in the Borough this year, while British Volleyball and British Cycling have an interest in the Sandwell Valley Site. Conversations are also opening up with some other large national festival and arts organisations.

Major events when successfully managed are long term relationships, many held year on year in the same location, bringing year on year growth.

Master Plan Summary



Capital Expenditure Cost

The breakdown of the anticipated capital costs for each zone are highlighted below:

Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Signage & Interpretation Board Update £20,000	Signage & Interpretation Board Update £20,000	Signage & Interpretation Board Update £20,000
E-Bike Recharging Point £5,000	E-Bike Recharging Point £10,000	
	Pavilion Refurbishment £250,000	
	Playzone (match funding with Football Foundation) £100,000	
	Mini Golf Upgrade £80,000	
£25,000	£460,000	£20,000

Infrastructure & Other	
Car Parking Improvements	£250,000
Drainage Improvements to 4 Fields	£200,000
Grass Protection for Overflow Car Parks	£190,000
Project Management Of Capital Works	£140,000
Dog Training Field	£50,000
Conservation Management Plan	£20,000
£880,000	

Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6
Signage & Interpretation Board Update £40,000	Signage & Interpretation Board Update £30,000	Signage & Interpretation Board Update £15,000
E-Bike Recharging Point £5,000	E-Bike Recharging Point £10,000	E-Bike Recharging Point £5,000
Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre Refurbishment (New Cafe/Retracting Roof) £1,252,033	Land Train £150,000	New Education Centre / Display and Food Barn £1,750,000
Heritage Discovery Zone £500,000	New Watersports Centre £2,554,024	
	Equipment Allowance £150,000	
£1,797,033	£2,894,024	£2,020,000















Total Capital Provision
£7,856,057

Implementation Roadmap

This implementation plan will be delivered by a dedicated project manager throughout.

KEY

Procurement/Preparation 
 Works & Completion 

Zone	Development	2024/25				2025/26				2026/27			
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Infrastructure & Other	Car Parking Improvements Drainage Improvements to 4 Fields Grass Protection for Overflow Car Parks Dog Training Field Conservation Management Plan												
Zone 1 - Dartmouth Park <small>(Gateway to Sandwell Valley)</small>	Signage & interpretation board updates E-Bike Recharging Points												
Zone 2 - King George V Pavillion, Adventure Play Area & Activities	Signage & interpretation board updates E-Bike Recharging Points King George V Pavillion Refurbishment Playzone (Match funding with FA) Mini-Golf Update												
Zone 3 - Showgrounds and Fairground	Signage & interpretation board updates												
Zone 4 - Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre and Priory Woods	Signage & interpretation board updates E-Bike Recharging Points Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre Refurbishment Heritage Discovery Zone												
Zone 5 - Swan Pool, Jubilee Woods, & Urban Bike Track	Signage & interpretation board updates E-Bike Recharging Points Land Train Swan Pool Water Sports Centre Equipment Allowance												
Zone 6 - Forge Mill Farm	Signage & interpretation board updates E-Bike Recharging Points New Display & Food Barn	