

## **SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the Milton Country Park Advisory Group held on  
Monday, 15 May 2006

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs HM Smith – Chairman

Councillors: Mrs HF Kember RT Summerfield

Also in attendance was Paul Oldham, Milton Parish Council and Sean Missen, Procurement Officer, SCDC.

### **1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Hall, Mrs SA Hatton and Mrs DP Roberts and Stephen Bennett, Chairman of the Friends of Milton Country Park.

### **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors Mrs HM Smith and RT Summerfield, together with Paul Oldham declared an interest as members of Milton Parish Council.

### **3. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2005 were agreed as a correct record.

### **4. MATTERS ARISING FROM MINUTES**

Minute 4.1 – Dog Update – Following co-operation by the DVLA, a warning letter had been sent to the owner regarding the behaviour of his dog; the action appeared to be effective.

Minute 4.3 – Re-surfacing of paths – The worst areas had been re-surfaced; the process was ongoing.

Minute 5 – Capping and Public Consultation – The Ranger reported that, apparently as a result of the heightened publicity, there had been an increase in visitors to the Park.

Minute 6.8 and 6.9 – Increasing income at the Park – Not yet actioned due to lack of time resource, however ownership of areas within the Park was confirmed.

Minute 8 – Rangers Report – SM reported that there were considerable staffing problems at the Park with one vacancy and one member of staff on long-term sick leave. Although the Assistant Ranger post had been offered to two separate people, they had subsequently declined the offer; in part this may have been due to the uncertainty of the future of the Park. Temporary staff had been employed on short-term contracts.

### **5. FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF THE PARK**

As a result of the capping process, ways in which to reduce expenditure of the Park had been considered. Cabinet had subsequently discussed a report on the future of the Park at its meeting on 9 February 2006 and had agreed that a decision be deferred pending completion of an investigation into the feasibility of outsourcing its management, including consideration of all or any on-going financial implications for the Council.

Prior to a further report to Cabinet in June, the Advisory Group considered the options available for the future of the Park, together with the responses from organisations interested in managing the Park. The following options had been suggested and included:

- Outsourcing the management of the Park
- Partnership with other organisations – this lessened the financial risk
- SCDC continuing to manage the Park - by raising income, eg introducing parking charges and increasing refreshment provision. (Parishioners had however made it known that were not in favour of parking charges)

Packs regarding the Management/Operation, Financial, Staffing and Legal information relating to the Park were sent to the following organisations who it was thought might be interested in managing the Park. These were:

- Cambridge Mencap
- Cambridge Preservation Society
- Milton Parish Council (at their request)
- The Varrier Jones Foundation
- The Wildlife Trust
- Cambridge City Council
- Huntingdonshire District Council
- RSPB
- National Trust

Of those organisations, responses were received from:  
Hunts DC - Declined as being too far away.

Varrier Jones Foundation - the Chief Executive, John Willis had visited the park and, via e-mail, expressed an interest in managing the park as part of their rehabilitation programme for those persons having a disability or injury. A letter confirming interest was expected. *(Subsequently, an e-mail has confirmed their trustees did not want to pursue this)*

Cambridge Mencap – was interested in taking on the management, or possibly in forming a partnership arrangement with SCDC and looking for a long-term agreement to guarantee investment. It was anticipated they may want the existing visitor centre to be replaced altogether.

College of West Anglia – They had expressed an interest, by letter, after learning of this exercise and as a public organisation were looking for a negotiation on the terms prior to commitment.

Milton Parish Council – Proposed a charitable trust with a partnership organisation to form an overall community partnership for a local facility involving the parishioners. As a charity, eligibility for grants would become available that were not presently offered to the district council. The Parish Council confirmed its objection to parking charges, and its preference for the continuation of the education facilities rather than an increase in the refreshment facilities.

Cambridge Preservation Society – A letter was anticipated expressing interest, to follow up a recent e-mail.

The Friends of Milton Country Park had also been informed of the situation concerning the Park and had discussed at its last meeting the uncertainty about the Parks future. The Friends indicated that they would prefer for the existing arrangements to be maintained as it was felt that the Council had run the park well. If the option to 'out-source' were agreed,

the Friends would remain neutral and not take a stance for or against any possible third party. They did however agree that any proposal should maintain the current balance of wildlife, recreation and education. The Friends also suggested that the future consultation process should be open to the general public as it had not been clear who had initially been approached.

In conclusion, the Chairman, on behalf of the Friends of Milton Country Park, thanked Councillor Mrs Anne Muncey for all the hard work she had undertaken on behalf of the Friends and her involvement in the Advisory Group.

### **The Way Forward**

The Head of Community Services had consulted with the Head of Legal Services and the Procurement Officer for guidance on the way to proceed. Advice had been given that should Members decide to adopt the tender process, account should be taken of the Financial Regulations within the Council's Standing Orders, that a process in excess of £120,000 must go through the tender process. This procedure was in place to protect the Council's Council Tax payers and was subject to exemption from EU regulations, which provide for an exemption to advertise in cases of amenity and recreation. The process should also be advertised to allow other interested organisations to consider the available documentation.

The tender process also allowed scope for interested parties to seek clarification on questions raised, with responses circulated to all parties for reasons of equality. It would also include specifying the nature and level of task involved in managing the Park and the process for evaluation of the tender.

The issue of tree management and the risk of falling trees was discussed and it was noted that if the management of the Park was carried out by another organisation, the Council would have to ensure these risks would be suitably managed as part of the transfer. A question was raised that if a charitable trust did not have the means to meet claims, would the Council bear the full or a reduced liability? Legal advice would be sought on that matter. **SMc to action**

It was noted that the County Council had specified that SCDC indemnify them by £1m for the part of the Park licenced to SCDC; this aspect would have to be re-negotiated should another organisation take over management of the Park. Similarly, authority from owners of other parts of the Park would be required if management of the Park were to pass to another organisation. As the County Council owned a significant part of the Park, it was suggested that representatives should be involved in future discussions. SM agreed to arrange a meeting with the County's Countryside Management Team. **SM to action**

It was suggested that a sum of money could be given by the Council to the future managers of the Park with the remainder of the costs borne by them. It was noted that a County Council in the south east had transferred its open space to a local wildlife trust using this method and that enquiries could be made on the sum involved and the method of implementation used. **MB to action?**

As a result of new developments on the edge of the City, particularly the proposal at Chesterton Sidings, commuted sums in the form of S106 Agreements could be given by the developers, for example, maintenance of open space for use in the Park, as residents from the new development would have access to the amenities at the Park.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The Advisory Group agreed the following points of action:

- (a) Invite the County Council to future meetings of the Advisory Group when discussing the future management of the Park.
- (b) Discussions to be held with those organisations showing an interest in the future management of the park with individual issues raised, circulated to all organisations.
- (c) A report to be prepared for the next meeting of Cabinet on 8 June 2006 to include:
  - (i) the situation to date
  - (ii) procurement details
  - (iii) possibility of setting up a Community Trust, aiming for a suggested 50% revenue reduction by SCDC
  - (iv) what officer time would need to be spent on the specification/tender/trust process
- (d) In the event of the formation of a Trust at the Park, the Friends of MCP to represent the public as users of the Park

## **6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on Thursday, 20 July 2006 at 10am in the Visitors Centre.

## **7. WALK AROUND THE PARK**

Following the meeting, members of the Advisory Group looked at parts of the pathways that had been resurfaced, noted that trees had been cut back to let light and air to the bridge over the southern end of Halls Pool in order to alleviate the slippage problems and that in order to stabilise the jetty at Dickerson's Pit, soil had been placed underneath.

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**The Meeting ended at 11.45 a.m.**

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