

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Leader and Cabinet

9 February 2006

**AUTHOR:** Chief Executive

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### IMPROVING FACILITIES AT MILTON COUNTRY PARK

#### Purpose

1. This report outlines a future direction in the management of Milton Country Park, retaining the service in-house and increasing income through car parking charges and developing a lakeside café.

#### Effect on Corporate Objectives

2. Quality, Accessible Services	The proposals will enhance the quality of the park's service, building on the accessibility improvements made over recent years.
Village Life	Milton residents have concerns that the parking charges will lead to parking on nearby streets and in the community centre car park. A café would provide a popular enhancement to the park.
Sustainability	The measures set out are aimed at achieving a sustainable service, protecting the benefits of the country park for the future.
Partnership	Opportunities for partnership include the proposals from Cambridge Mencap to manage the park, and future options with the Cambridge Sports Lakes, if/when this scheme develops.

#### Background

3. Milton Country Park has been operating for 12 years, providing a country park service for residents of South Cambs, which also attracts as many visitors from Cambridge. The facilities have been gradually improved during that time, although these have mainly been developments within the overall park design when it was established, rather than major changes.
4. The park is the only facility provided by the Council, and it has enjoyed considerable support as a significant amenity for the whole area. However, this singularity has led to questions about the long-term viability of the park's service; neighbouring authorities have a range of venues to manage, with a team of staff able to provide support and cover across them.
5. Due to this vulnerability in a time of financial constraints, some informal soundings were taken with other organisations about their possible interest in considering taking on the management of the park. All of the organisations approached were cautious, and the response was not very encouraging about pursuing the possibility of out-sourcing management, although some agencies might have been interested depending on the terms.
6. One organisation, which was not approached, was Cambridge Mencap, who has run the Swallows café at the park for many years, as they do not have any experience in managing parks or similar amenities. However, Mencap have expressed their

considerable interest in taking on the management, after a scheme for a café and training building within the park was not favoured in terms of planning support.

7. The savings necessitated by Council tax capping have forced a major rethink about the park and its service, in order to realise considerable budget reductions, as for the rest of Community Services. The changes approved in the autumn include a halving of the budget for maintenance of the buildings, structures and environment of the park, and a nearly ten-fold increase in income anticipated. The increased income was based largely on the introduction of car parking charges, with some income from lettings at the visitor centre.

### Considerations

8. Officers are aware of the sensitivity of the proposed introduction of car parking charges: this point had been made clear by the local members, the Friends of the park, and the Parish Council representative on the park's Advisory Group. In view of this, three steps were arranged to provide a wider perspective: the Head of Community Services approached the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) for an external review of the park and the options available; the Senior Ranger made enquiries about the direction and financial situation of other country park services; and a public consultation event was arranged.
9. ILAM provided an experienced consultant who has visited the park and provided an assessment report with recommendations for the future; copies of his report are being made available to all cabinet members and the local members. The consultant, Ken McAnespie, is an ILAM Associate who has carried out assessments of over 200 such facilities, and these have provided him with a strong basis for comparisons.
10. His findings, in summary, were:
  - (a) The park's standards and what it has to offer are good, though some shortcomings
  - (b) The expenditure levels are reasonable
  - (c) The income levels are very much lower than could be expected

He also made a number of detailed recommendations and proposals about improvements and developments at the park. His four proposals were aimed at achieving increased income, while enhancing the service offered:

- (d) **Charge for car parking** – needed to ensure the park is sustainable, even though this would inevitably cause criticism.
  - (b) **Provide a high quality cafeteria** – a huge potential benefit in income generation and improved satisfaction, exploiting potential for lakeside location upstairs.
  - (c) **Redesign lower level of centre** – provide a large display area, through removing current kiosk.
  - (d) **Link car park to centre** – extending parking would increase use of visitor centre and café.
11. The experience of other country park services indicates that most are being required to considerably increase their income levels, to minimise their net cost. Their experience confirms that parking charges and catering are the two main sources of income. Some also recommend in-house catering as a much better and more rewarding option than using an external caterer.

### Consultations

12. A public meeting was held at the park on Sunday 22 January, and it was very well attended with between 120 and 150 people present. At the meeting there was a presentation of the Council's financial position, which has prompted the changes being considered, the wider position of other country park services, and the findings from the consultants report, presenting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the park. There were many comments and questions; these are summarised in **Appendix 1**.
13. Forms were also provided for more detailed individual comments, and about 50 were completed and have been analysed to date. The findings from these forms are set out in **Appendix 2**. Further forms, as well as emails and letters, are being received; an oral update of the other points will be given in the meeting.
14. The overall findings indicate that the park is greatly appreciated for the beauty and peace of its natural environment, the accessible walks especially for Milton and Cambridge residents, the birds and wildlife, and the lakes, woodland and open spaces. The feeling of those present was that the Council should continue to manage the park, with a 'show of hands' indicating strong support.
15. While a few people have indicated that they would be happy to pay parking charges, there was strong opposition to such a move due to the potential adverse impact in Milton, with more parking anticipated on nearby roads and in the community centre car park. Some alternative suggestions for income were put forward, but none appear likely to raise the level of income needed, although the idea of business sponsorship will be pursued. A number of people suggested use as a caravan site, but others were strongly opposed to this; this option is not viewed as feasible in the limited space available.

### **Options**

16. Most responses were strongly in favour of the proposal to have a café upstairs, and a good number were keen to use it. Some concern was expressed about the loss of the classroom area upstairs, due to the café. It was suggested that it could still be used for activities before and after the café opening times.
17. The Council's budget has been prepared on the basis of the additional £35,000 income proposed and accepted as part of the capping reductions. There appears to be no realistic alternative option to raising the large majority of this through charging for parking.
18. There are options about the level of charges. In order to raise the required income, while recognising the resistance will be less for a lower charge, it proposed that a £1 charge is made for any stay. The option of a 'season ticket' has been requested, and it is felt this would be important for the large number of regular users who come daily to the park. A 'season ticket' is therefore proposed at a level of £14 for 3 months. The suggestion of discounting the parking fee against purchases in the café will be investigated; this would be a very good promotional measure when charges are introduced.
19. The option of extending the car park towards the centre is not one which is recommended at present, as there is no capacity to arrange this at the same time as the café and parking charges are introduced, in terms of both staff resources and funding. This option will be considered again in the future, as proximity of parking would be likely to boost use of the café.

20. The management of the park could be outsourced, and Cambridge Mencap are keen to be allowed to put in a detailed proposal for undertaking this. At the public meeting their Chief Executive put forward this option, with a proposal that a Community Trust be established to allow a wider range of sources of funding to be accessed. He indicated that their proposals would include demolishing and replacing the current visitor centre with an improved, environmentally sustainable building.
21. The expressed views at the public meeting indicated that most or all of those present supported the council continuing to manage the park as it was felt to be a public facility which should remain the responsibility of the council.
22. The current downstairs kiosk provides a very limited service in terms of opening hours and the range of refreshments provided, although it should be noted that after 8+ years with no changes an enhanced range including baked potatoes has recently been introduced.
23. The option of creating an upstairs kitchen could transform the refreshment service offered, both overcoming the limitations of the very small limited kiosk, and allowing an upstairs café to operate with the benefit of the lakeside views. As services are already provided to the upstairs area, this is a practical option.
24. The operation of an upstairs café could be undertaken by either a specialist catering company or by an in-house catering operation. Using an external franchise would reduce the costs to the Council, but would also greatly reduce any income.

#### **Financial Implications**

25. The costs of installing a parking ticket machine, and other changes necessary to enable parking charges, have been included in the current budget spending plans.
26. Establishing an upstairs kitchen will be significant, and costs are currently being investigated. It is anticipated that these costs can be met from the current park budget, as long as work can be commissioned and undertaken within this financial year.
27. A 'business plan' is being prepared to establish the likely level of running costs and income from the café. The experiences of catering operations at other country parks, and other catering operations, have been sought; these indicate that a profitable operation is a realistic expectation, if the operation is established well. The income will meet the costs of the operation, with profits used to allow other investment in the park.
28. The revenue costs of the café, including the cost of staffing, will be met from the café income after an initial period when the park's maintenance budget is used.

#### **Legal Implications**

29. The terms of the lease of the land at the southern end of the park restricts use to the purposes of a country park. The current proposals fall within this requirement.
30. The enforcement of the parking charge can be effected by applying to the Driver Vehicle Licensing Authority for the ownership details of cars whose owners fail to purchase parking tickets; the council can reasonably request this information to assist in recovering legitimate charges. A new bylaw may be required to establish an appropriate level of fine.

## **Staffing Implications**

31. A legal agreement exists between the council and Cambridge Mencap for the running of the current Swallows refreshment operation. The agreement can be terminated giving 3 months notice, and it is proposed to give notice of termination.
32. The current Ranger team can oversee and manage the changes outlined in this report. The one area where additional staffing will be required is to run the catering operation. After advice, the kitchen is being planned around a single person operation, with a catering manager who prepares and cooks food on the premises, using quiet times to bake etc, and who serves the food and drinks during weekdays. Additional casual staff will be required at weekends, particularly on Sundays and in the summer holidays.
33. The catering manager will need to be employed on a temporary basis, with an assessment after 6 months; if the income does not match expectations the position will not be able to be sustained. An outside franchise would then need to be approached.
34. A new temporary post needs to be created, initially for 6 months. This post will be extended and if still successful after 12 months would seek to be made permanent. Recruitment to this post will be crucial; an enthusiastic and capable manager will be a key to making the café successful.

## **Risk Management Implications**

35. The proposals in this report seek to make the park sustainable. If the park did not have a sustainable future, the risks to life and limb from the bridges, lakes, trees etc would be critical. Maintaining the park will keep such risks to a low and manageable level.
36. The collection of parking charges presents some risk, and an operational plan to manage and minimise this risk is being drawn up.
37. Taking on the operation of a café at the park presents a financial risk. However, given the experience of other operations and the 'unique selling point' of a lakeside café that is very accessible to residents and businesses in and around Cambridge and Milton, this risk is considered acceptable.

## **Conclusions/Summary**

38. The park provides a key facility within the area to the north of Cambridge, and all want to see this sustained. In order to achieve this more income must be generated.
39. There is some degree of acceptance or support for parking charges, although there is considerable opposition from people in Milton. However, this form of charging is the only realistic one to achieve the level of income required to meet the budget; the introduction is another unfortunate consequence of the financial situation caused by capping.
40. The proposed charges are at a lower level than for other comparable country parks, and though unpopular it is anticipated that they will be accepted. The possible 'knock-on' consequences in Milton will need to be monitored and officers will need to liaise with the Parish Council and Community Centre; if there is a significant problem, officers will investigate if there are any steps that could be taken in mitigation.

41. The proposal to create an upstairs café in the visitor centre is widely supported. The creation of such a facility, along with other improvements over coming years, will provide a better service for visitors. It is hoped that this will offset any reaction to the parking charges from the large majority of visitors to the park.
42. The café will need to provide a good, consistent service, available every day, in the light of experience from Hinchingsbrooke and elsewhere. Home baked cakes and home made soup will be an important selling point, along with other good quality but uncomplicated fare. The manager of the facility will need to be an enthusiastic person, able to provide customers with the service they would expect from any well-run café.
43. There is considerable support for the council to run this service itself, retaining control and able to realise and reinvest the profits which should be achieved. This option requires initial investment, but the return that can be realised will be in proportion.
44. The income from the two activities outlined above should enable the council to retain the management of the park itself, as the majority want. This should enable the council to demonstrate that it has reacted creatively to the severe difficulties caused by capping, and has responded with a renewed determination to provide a good service to the residents of South Cams.
45. Retaining the management in-house will mean turning down the offer of Cambridge Mencap to take this on. However, it may be that there are some opportunities for future partnership working with Mencap and others, to further enhance what is offered at the park, and to provide appropriate opportunities for all groups of residents in the district. The current agreement with Mencap to run the Swallows café will need to be brought to a close.
46. The consultation process has provided a considerable range of ideas for further improvements at the park. These ideas will be retained, and when opportunities allow a programme of further improvements will be developed.

### **Recommendations**

47. It is recommended that:
  - (a) Parking charges are introduced as set out in this report
  - (b) A café is established in the upstairs part of the visitor centre, with a new kitchen created to replace the current kiosk facility.
  - (c) The management of the park is retained in-house, subject to a review towards the end of 2006.
  - (d) A temporary post of Catering Manager is created, initially for 6 months, but with a view to being made permanent if the café flourishes; other casual staff are taken on to assist
  - (e) A Business Plan for the operation of the café, and appropriate marketing, is prepared for the approval of the Portfolio Holder, in consultation with the Advisory Group.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

1. Milton Country Park Audit and Options Appraisal of Dec 2005
2. Findings from consultation event (included in appendices)

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