

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet 14 December 2006
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MILTON COUNTRY PARK

Purpose

1. This report provides an update on measures to manage Milton Country Park at a lower cost to the Council and recommends steps to take this forward.

Background

2. Cabinet has considered the future management of the park at its meetings in February, June and September. These reports have put forward measures to increase income, to comply with the need to make reductions in the Council's net budget, and explored options for outsourcing the management of the park with a 'market –testing' exercise.
3. Car parking charges were not approved in February, but were subsequently approved in September, when members were informed that the measures to introduce the charges meant they were likely to be in place in January 2007. It was also agreed to: negotiate with the County Council about their land in the centre of the park; undertake a 3-month trial with the College of West Anglia for their students to carry out practical work in the park; explore options for the catering franchise; and for officers to review the appropriate levels of staffing for the park. A report back to the December Cabinet meeting was agreed.
4. Officers have pursued these measures, alongside other steps to improve the position for the park, which are reported below, and to plan further savings in line with the agreed budget for 2007/08. However, this work has stretched the capacity of the officers, alongside their other responsibilities; the explorations have been undertaken while continuing to provide and develop the services at the park and in the rest of Community Services.

Considerations: a) Negotiations with the County Council

5. There has not been a positive response from the County to suggestions that they should meet some of the costs of the park, as they own a section of the land; they have indicated that they also have significant budgetary pressures, and the current licence agreement between the two councils precludes any payments by them.
6. Officers have therefore made a new approach, with a different emphasis. The Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities', which is considered elsewhere on this Cabinet agenda, has a chapter on efficiency – transforming local services; one section of this highlights the vital role of asset management in achieving cost savings for local authorities. One of the Beacon Councils who are cited as offering a range of tailored support to help other local authorities "drive improvement in managing their assets" is Cambridgeshire. An approach has therefore been made to the County to seek their assistance in reviewing Milton Country Park, as one of the few assets managed by this Council, excepting our housing stock.

7. The aim is to secure the skills available from a Beacon Council in an arms-length review of our park land, including the section in the County's own ownership, in a way which has not been possible using our staff. This review should ensure that a thorough, professional examination of the value and costs of the park can be carried out, to enable us to arrive at a fully researched outcome, to meet the views expressed in both the Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee. An oral update on the progress of this approach will be given at the meeting.

b) Car Parking

8. The ticket machine for parking charges is due to be delivered and installed this month, in time to start charging in January, as expected. Officers have been working on an extensive range of issues in order to achieve this, including the design and installation of signage, the tickets, the provision of season tickets for regular users, the processes for running the system, the security measures on handling the money generated, and enforcement processes. The details of these matters have, where appropriate, been dealt with through the Portfolio Holder.
9. The lack of experience of such charges at this council means that officers have been learning as they proceed, using the experience of other country parks who charge for parking. Further changes may be needed as our experience develops, and these will be considered by the Portfolio Holder or at whatever level is appropriate.

c) College of West Anglia

10. A programme of activities has been set up by the Rangers, working with the College tutor, for up to a dozen students; the work items are those which meet the curriculum needs, which has included ditch clearance, coppicing trees, tree planting and coppicing scrub on the edge of the lake. The visits take place once a week for two hours, although the actual working time appears to be considerably less.
11. A review meeting will be arranged for later this month or January, though initial feedback from the college tutor is that the work is meeting the needs of their students. From our viewpoint the amount of work completed is rather disappointing, and the Ranger staff have had to go back and tidy up/complete work on several occasions. The benefits of this collaboration are not what we had hoped for; while it has been a useful piece of joint work, its contribution towards the future management of the park looks to be marginal.

d) Catering arrangements

12. Notice has formally been given to Cambridge Mencap that the current catering agreement for the Swallows café will end on 31 March 2007, in line with the conclusions of the Advisory Group. The letter also thanked them for the service they have given in running Swallows, and indicating that they will be given an opportunity to tender for the service to start in the Spring. Further work is now needed to draw up a specification for the service and carry out this tendering process. Options for the future may include consideration of a mobile catering unit, and/or an ice cream van.

e) Establishing a Trust to take on the park

13. Officers have considered the practicality of establishing a Trust to take on the responsibility of managing or owning the park, and some initial discussions have been held. Experience from elsewhere indicates that the viability of a Trust is

increased with the wider scope it has, and opportunities to develop a wider Trust would be beneficial.

14. Consideration of these issues is taking place for the management of large-scale open spaces for the developments around the fringes of Cambridge, and at Northstowe, with colleagues from the City and county Councils. These discussions have been prompted by the need to agree the arrangements for managing the proposed county park on Trumpington Meadows as part of the Southern Fringe planning applications; it has been suggested that a Trust would be the best way to undertake this.
15. Officers are putting forward the proposal that Milton should be considered as part of any Trust arrangement, as it serves the same function as the proposed new parks. The expertise of the Rangers could be a useful resource to assist in the detailed planning of any proposals; the opportunity for existing staff to be available to oversee the early stages of new country parks could also be helpful. The outcome of a workshop examining these issues on 11 December will be reported orally.
16. At the same time officers continue to explore other possible options for the long-term future of the park. Some initial discussions have been held with another agency whose areas of expertise and interest fit with those of a country park; these discussions are being pursued, and if they develop into a viable option, officers will bring this in a future report to cabinet.

f) Lettings of the Visitors Centre

17. The options to increase the letting income from the visitors centre are being explored, as discussion at the Advisory Group have considered the under-used potential of the upstairs area of the building. In order to improve this situation, a set of doors is being installed in the hallway to provide an acoustic and closable demarcation from other uses within the building.
18. One aspect of the asset management review may focus on the use of this building, and it is hoped that it may provide guidance on options for the future. There may be considerable potential for lettings for private functions, but this may require further investment if it is to be realised.

g) Corporate Sponsorship

19. A sponsorship package is currently being drawn up, in order to approach businesses around Milton and in the science and business parks across the A14. While individual sponsorship has already been successfully used in a small way, for particular items such as benches or trees, corporate sponsorship has not previously been tried.
20. The offer to companies will focus on the health benefits of the park to their staff and perhaps their clients, as well as an enhanced service in terms of information and special events. The sponsorship will also emphasise the 'green' credentials of being associated with a country park. It is proposed to have a range of sponsorship levels, with additional benefits such as advertising within the park available for companies donating higher amounts.
21. Advice has been sought from the Head of Legal Services about establishing a charitable body whose purpose is the maintenance of the park, so that sponsorship could be charitable. At present there is insufficient capacity in the legal service to undertake the work need to set up such a charity; it may be necessary to seek outside professional help if this is to be pursued.

h) Budgetary savings

22. Savings from the current budgets are being planned for 2007/08 in a number of areas. Some of these areas will require changes in the procurement of services, and work is ongoing to consider alternative suppliers, or to reduce the specification of works from outside contractors. Formal negotiations with staff will be undertaken to review aspects of their current terms and conditions of service, including the out-of-hours arrangements.
23. A detailed investigation has been undertaken into the possibility of reducing the Ranger team from 3 to 2 staff; this is attached as **Appendix A**. The conclusion, based on the need for paid staff to open and close the park each day, is that 2 staff working alone would be insufficient to cover the annual hours the park is open, even before allowing for any sickness to be covered. The park has a considerable number of operations or events that require two Rangers working together; there is also the need for staff to meet together as a team on a reasonable regular basis.

i) Application for Local Nature Reserve designation

24. The Council's Ecology Officer, working with the Senior Ranger, has undertaken work to prepare an application for Local Nature Reserve (LNR) status from Natural England. In effect this designation would acknowledge and formalise the current position of the park as a haven for wildlife. The designation of LNR is supported by local plan policies and increasing the number of such reserves fits with Conservation policies.
25. The other benefits of LNR are that it may enable applications for funding to for work or projects in the park, and it provides some legal protection for the site. The other land owners and freeholder for parts of the site have been consulted; both the County Council and Milton Parish Council, who own parts of the northern end of the site, have given their consent for an application. However, the freeholder of the Southern end of the park, from whom the Council have a long lease, has not given consent, and so this land cannot be included in an application.
26. The issues are set out in the report in **Appendix B**, which was taken to the recent Portfolio Holder meeting and supported for bringing to cabinet. The proposal is to apply for LNR designation of all the land in the park north of the 13th Public Drain.

Options

27. Cabinet has two options with regard to applying for LNR status for the park:
- (a) Approve an application to Natural England for designation
 - (b) Not to approve an application.

Implications

28.	Financial	The measures in this report are part of the steps to reduce the net cost of the park; there are no additional costs to the current budget. It should be noted that the budgeted income from parking this year will not be achieved, as the charges were approved in September, not February when they were first put forward.
	Legal	The advice of the head of Legal Services has been taken with regard to the enforcement of car parking charges.

Staffing	Dealt with in the body of the report.
Risk Management	The safe operation of the park has been a major consideration in the review of staffing levels in the park, and in the procedures for handling parking charges. The proposals made should ensure that risks can be appropriately managed.
Equal Opportunities	The operation of the park is undertaken to ensure that access is available to all. The park is regularly used by a number of groups who work with clients with learning or other disabilities.

Consultations

29. Consultation has taken place through the Advisory Committee, which includes representatives of the Friends of Milton county Park, and Milton Parish Council. There have also been discussions at the Portfolio Holder's meetings, which include Scrutiny Monitors and opposition spokespeople. Some consultation has taken place directly with appropriate organisations, such as the Parish council concerning a sign to be erected in the Community Centre car park.

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

30. Affordable Homes	None
Customer Service	None
Northstowe and other growth areas	The expertise of the Ranger team is a valuable resource for assisting in the detailed consideration of proposals for new country parks in Northstowe and on the fringes of Cambridge. The Senior Ranger is contributing to discussions of a possible new Trust to manage these parks.
Quality, Accessible Services	The park provides a high quality, accessible countryside environment for residents of South Cambs and Cambridge.
Village Life	The park is an important facility for many residents of Milton.
Sustainability	Areas of woodland contribute to sustainability.
Partnership	Aspects of partnership working are explored in the report.

Conclusions/Summary

31. Officers have been working on three related areas of work during the last year: making changes to the current service to increase income and reduce costs; exploring ideas and developing options for the longer-term management of the park; and maintaining the park as an attractive environment for people and wildlife. The first two of these tasks has had to be fitted in with other existing work, and progress has been difficult.
32. The approach to the County Council for assistance in an asset management review is therefore seen as a way forward using a level of expertise that is not available within this Council. Through this process we aim to be able to achieve a well-founded and largely independent analysis on which to base our longer-term decisions concerning the future of the park. The aim is to bring together the widely varying views of members and to establish a course that can command widespread support.
33. The application for LNR status is one measure on which the Ecology Officer has been working, with others, to enhance the standing of the park. If we are successful in our application, this may also enable us to apply for grants for which we are not otherwise eligible. In a difficult time, this step provides a positive note and it would boost both staff morale and the park's and the Council's public profile.

34. The other measures noted in the report are ongoing work to reduce the net cost of the park to the Council, in line with budgetary pressures, while maintaining a safe and attractive environment that receives 200 – 250,000 visits per year. The reduction of the Ranger team to 2 would not provide a safe operation, given all the duties currently undertaken, especially during the summer period when the car park and facilities are open for 11 hours each day.
35. During 2007 there are a range of demanding new responsibilities to be fulfilled, including management of the parking charges and attracting and providing a service to corporate sponsors. This is not a time when a reduced staffing regime could be sustained. This situation will need to be kept under review, in case the level of income from sponsorship and other sources proves insufficient, and it is proposed that September would be the right time to undertake such a review. If a decision were found to be necessary to reduce the staffing at the park, there would be a significant impact on the service provided: with less staff the park would provide less, and the environment would be less well maintained.

Recommendations

36. It is recommended that Cabinet
- (i) approves work to establish the medium/long-term future of the park through:
 - (a) Undertaking an Asset Management Review with the assistance of the County Council, and
 - (b) Seeking an appropriate external organisation to take on the management, and possibly ownership of the park, whether through a Trust or by another suitable agency.
 - (ii) approves the creation of a Local Nature Reserve covering the whole area of the park North of the 13th Public Drain, including Tompkins Mead.
 - (iii) Notes the proposals for reducing the current and future net cost of the park through:
 - (a) increasing income through car parking charges, retendering the catering operation, lettings of the visitor centre and obtaining sponsorship for the park,
 - (b) reductions in expenditure on services and
 - (c) retaining the current staff team of three Rangers, subject to review in/around September 2007.

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

- The local Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities”
- Report to Cabinet on 14 Sept 06 “The Management of Milton Country Park”
- Tuesday Work Plan for College of West Anglia to December 2006

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