

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet 8 March 2007
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LAND OWNERSHIP AT MILTON COUNTRY PARK

Purpose

1. This report sets out the position on the current land ownership at the park and seeks approval, in principle, for releasing the Council's land to another agency, in order for a new manager to run the park.

Background

2. In December 2006 the Cabinet decided that a new body to manage the country park must be found by 31 August 2007, otherwise the park faced closure. This decision was taken after a process during 2006 to seek alternative management, which had not proved successful.
3. At the Council meeting in January 2007, Council agreed to support the aims of the Save the Park campaign and to work with all parties to ensure that the park could continue to remain open, under new management.
4. An officer project team has been established and work is underway to achieve the aim of agreeing a new manager by the deadline, working with the Portfolio Holder for Community Development. The project team will be reporting progress on the various aspects of their work, and a timetable for the process, at the Cabinet meeting in April.

Considerations

5. There are a number of organisations that are very interested in considering taking on the management of the park, and ongoing discussions have been taking place with the Portfolio Holder and officers. An information pack, with operational, financial and legal information has been sent out to all these organisations, as a first step towards a competitive process to consider offers.
6. A workshop has been arranged with Cambridge Preservation Society and Cambridgeshire Horizons, for 29 March, to enable all those agencies interested to come together and consider the position. The main aim of the workshop is to provide guidance on a sustainable future for Milton Country Park under new management arrangements, with three sub aims:
 - a) Scrutinise and advise on the options being pursued - setting up a community Trust and/or a competitive process to seek a new management agency
 - b) Review ways in which other agencies and the public can help support the park's future
 - c) Promote a wider understanding of the issues and options
7. However, there is one key issue that needs a decision at this stage, in order to provide some clarity for the workshop, and allow officers to make progress. This

concerns the land ownership position at the park, and the willingness of this Council and the County Council to consider releasing their land to a new management agency. This Council own the areas of the park around the two main lakes, while the County owns the central area of the park with is licensed to SCDC, on a licence that can be terminated at six months notice on either side.

8. The current ownership pattern does not provide a secure basis for managing the park, and would be likely to prove an insurmountable problem for a new organisation to take the park on. There is also a need for some security for a new body, so they can plan their operation and any investment over an acceptable time period.
9. The land could be released through either selling it, or more likely leasing it to a new organisation on a 'peppercorn' basis, with conditions in the lease about maintaining the use as a country park. The appropriate period of such a lease can be explored at the workshop at the end of March, to inform the basis of a final decision. The findings of the workshop will be reported back to Cabinet.
10. Once this Council has made a decision in principle about its land, officers will be in a better position to negotiate with the County Council concerning their land. An initial exchange of letters has taken place with the County, and they are seeking further clarification before a decision about their land can be considered.

Options

11. There are three options:
 - (a) Cabinet could agree in principle to release our land to a new managing agency, with further consideration of the details to be brought back to a future meeting, with the findings from the forthcoming workshop. The option clarifies the Council's intentions, and will allow for further consultation to inform the final decision. It will also give a basis for negotiations with the County Council.
 - (b) A decision to grant a lease, or to sell the land, could be taken. However, the basis for such a decision, and the relative merits for leasing or selling, would not have been able to be properly considered.
 - (c) Cabinet could decide not to consider releasing the land. The consequence of such is decision would be to create uncertainty for agencies that are currently interested in considering managing the park, and significantly reduce the likelihood of agreement of a new management agency within the set deadline.

Implications

12.	Financial	Securing a new managing agency will enable the Council to reduce its financial commitment to running the park. The details of the financial consequences of a sale or lease will need to be considered in a subsequent report.
	Legal	Leasing or selling the land in the park would reduce the Council's legal liabilities arising from the current operation. Lease conditions could be considered which match those for the area of land at the southern end of the park, which the council holds on a long lease, requiring that the land is used as a country park.
	Staffing	None specific to this report. Staffing issues will be considered in future reports.

Risk Management	Facilitating the transfer will enable the Council to reduce the risks arising from managing the park, as well as the effects on the Council's reputation if the park has to be closed.
Equal Opportunities	Securing the future of the park will enable access for all sections of the community to be maintained.

Consultations

13. Informal discussions have taken place with a range of organisations. Formal consultation will take place through requests the forthcoming workshop and the process for seeking formal 'expressions of interest' from interested agencies.

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

14. Affordable Homes	None.
Customer Service	Local management may provide more scope for varied services, responding to customers' wishes
Northstowe and other growth areas	Country parks play an important role in providing access to open space, recreational opportunities and the countryside, including for the growth developments. Milton Country Park is likely to be the most accessible such space for the growth in the Cambridge northern fringe.
Quality, Accessible Services	Keeping the park open and enabling a transfer to a new agency will allow the current service to be maintained and hopefully enhanced.
Village Life	The park plays an important recreational role for local villages, especially Milton.
Sustainability	Maintaining the natural environment of the park contributes to sustainability objectives.
Partnership	Establishing a new managing agency will be undertaken through partnership with other organisations.

Conclusions/Summary

15. A decision in principle on the Council's willingness to release its land in the park will enable officers to move forward discussions with other land owners, and with agencies interested in the park.

Recommendation

16. It is recommended that Cabinet agrees to the principle of releasing the Council's land within the park to a new agency, to enable it to take on the park's management, subject to full consideration of the nature of such a disposal being brought to a future Cabinet for decision, taking into account the views of other agencies.

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

Proposal for workshop on 29 March 2007 with Cambridge Preservation Society

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