

meeting CABINET

date 14 September 2011

agenda item number 9

REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Redevelopment of the Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre

Purpose of report

1. This report seeks Cabinet approval for:
 - a) the undertaking of a competitive process to offer and award a works and services concession to a third party operating partner for the design, build, finance and operation of a new visitor centre/attraction at Sherwood Forest. The process will be conducted in compliance with European Union guidelines for the award of a concession; and
 - b) expenditure on the estimated costs associated with the process.

Information and advice

Background

2. Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre is located on the Sherwood Forest National Nature Reserve (NNR) on the outskirts of Edwinstowe. The NNR is a European Special Area for Conservation (SAC) designated under the Habitats Directive. The County Council manages part of the NNR & SAC under an agreement with Natural England, the Government's nature conservation body.
3. For a number of years, the Council has sought to redevelop and remodel the visitor and tourist offer of the Visitor Centre. Originally constructed in the 1970s when the Council leased the site from the Thoresby Estate, the existing Centre is now a well liked but also well worn visitor attraction.
4. In 2002, the Council agreed with Natural England to relocate the Visitor Centre and its associated car park from within the NNR boundary. All facilities should have been removed by December 2010, but in the light of its financial constraints, the Council has agreed with Natural England that the relocation may be delayed to 2016/17.

5. A feasibility study on the relocation of the current Centre was undertaken in 2004. An arable field adjacent to the NNR site was identified as the preferred site for a new Centre, and was purchased by the Council for this purpose in 2008.
6. Following the Council's unsuccessful Big Lottery bid for the Living Legend scheme in 2007/8, various alternative options have been considered for revitalising the Visitor Centre. However, in 2010, as part of the budget reduction programme, the Council agreed that its planned capital investment of £5.2m in a new facility should be deferred until the 2015/16 financial year.

The case for change

7. In addition to the requirement to vacate the NNR site, the Council recognises that there is great potential for a new visitor attraction at the Sherwood site. To increase the current visitor numbers of 350,000 per annum will benefit local businesses and the surrounding area economically. Achieving such an objective will, however, require significant improvement and investment.
8. In consequence, the Council needs to consider how it might accelerate the potential development of a replacement facility, whilst seeking to limit its planned capital commitment to the redevelopment of the Centre.
9. The vision for a new visitor centre/attraction is:-

To create a new visitor attraction which promotes and enhances the global reputation of Sherwood Forest, the legend of Robin Hood and the broader history and heritage of Nottinghamshire.
10. The proposal set out in this report - to undertake a process to identify and secure a third party developer (concessionaire) to work with the County Council - offers a means of achieving these objectives.

The Council Offer

11. The business objectives which will guide the concession offer are summarised below:-
 - the creation of a new, exciting, innovative all weather, all year round visitor and tourist attraction that will:
 - increase visitor numbers
 - have a minimum life span of 25 years
 - have a landscape plan that is compatible with any building design
 - permit free access to the National Nature Reserve (NNR) through a safe road crossing
 - manage visitor impact on the habitat of the NNR
 - provide appropriate visitor information on the NNR, Sherwood Forest and Nottinghamshire

- provide sufficient educational and learning facilities
 - provide sufficient car parking facilities and/or park and ride operations
 - ensure that environmental and sustainable good practice is followed during the design, development and operation of the centre.
- ensure the site infrastructure can support increased visitor numbers
 - secure the involvement of partner agencies and organisations
 - provide facilities for NNR ranger and site management personnel and their equipment including communication facilities
 - reinvest a proportion of income to support NNR management
 - reduce the level of capital commitment required from the County Council.

Offer Process and Evaluation

12. The offer process will be a two stage process that complies with EU guidelines for the award of a concession.
13. Stage one will include an open advertisement to invite expressions of interest from potential developers to submit outline proposals for a new centre together with background financial information required for due diligence. These initial proposals will be evaluated according to criteria covering key issues such as finance, sustainability, and environmental impact, and a shortlist of up to three potential developers selected to progress to stage two.
14. Stage two will comprise a more detailed dialogue process with shortlisted developers. Following a final evaluation, a preferred developer will be recommended for Council approval.
15. Subject to Cabinet approval, the offer process will commence in late September 2011. It is anticipated that the process, if successful, will be concluded by late Spring 2012.

Statutory and policy implications

16. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, personnel, crime and disorder and those using the service. Where such implications are material, they have been described in the text of the report. Attention is however drawn to the following:

Personnel implications

17. In the event of the Council developing contractual arrangements with a concessionaire, the Council would comply with statute and its human resource policy framework in respect of the staff currently employed at the Centre.

Financial implications

18. Within its capital programme, the Council has identified an allocation of £5.2m towards a new Centre, with any drawdown of this fund to be made after April 2015.
19. The offer process for the concession will seek to maximise the capital contribution of potential developers. Undertaking the offer process will enable the Council to determine whether, in order to facilitate the development of a new Centre within the timescales set out in this report, it would be prudent to reschedule the drawdown of a proportion of its planned capital allocation.
20. It is initially estimated that the recommended offer process will incur additional costs for legal and specialist advice of approximately £100,000. External legal and specialist advice costs will be met from the Council's Transformation Programme budget. Other costs will be met from within the Culture and Community Portfolio budget.

Equal opportunities implications

21. The delivery of the Council's vision for the Centre will improve current levels of access for those with disabilities. In addition, should the Council procure a developer concessionaire for the Centre, the resultant management contract would require the partner to comply with all current equal opportunities related statute.

Implications for service users

22. The delivery of the Council's vision for the Centre would improve customer numbers and the customer experience significantly, through the establishment of a range of new and enhanced facilities.

Corporate Property implications

23. The development and management of the Centre by a third party would significantly improve the Council's estate by supplementing/replacing the existing provision with modern, new build facilities. This would improve services for Centre customers and reduce the capital and health and safety related risks faced by the Council.

RECOMMENDATION

24. That Cabinet approves:-
 - i) the process to secure a developer concessionaire to design, build, finance and operate a new Visitor Centre at Sherwood Forest;
 - ii) expenditure on the estimated costs associated with this exercise; and

- iii) notes that a final report to recommend the appointment of a concessionaire, and confirm the arrangements to be put in place for the longer term development of the visitor attraction and the National Nature Reserve, will be submitted to Council in 2012.

COUNCILLOR JOHN COTTEE

Cabinet Member for Cultural and Community Services

Reasons for recommendations

- 25. Procuring a third party concessionaire for the Centre through a service and works concession agreement process is the most cost effective and lowest risk option facing the Council to develop a new visitor centre at Sherwood.

Legal Services' comments (SSR/19.08.11)

- 26. The recommendations set out in this report are matters that may be approved by Cabinet. All contracts that are procured by the Council must comply with the Council's Financial Regulations and the Constitution.

Financial comments of the Service Director – Finance (NDR)

- 27. The financial implications associated with the project are set out in paragraphs 18 to 20 of this report.

Background papers available for inspection

None

Electoral division(s) affected

Nottinghamshire

M19C2880