

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURE**RUFFORD COUNTRY PARK AND BESTWOOD COUNTRY PARK FUTURE
OPTIONS****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report provides an overview of the current provision and options for the future of Rufford Country Park and Bestwood Country Park and seeks approval to:
 - a) undertake soft market testing to gauge the potential viability of establishing alternative arrangements for the future delivery of the catering and commercial offer at Rufford, with resultant recommendations to be considered by Committee at its March 2016 meeting
 - b) continue work to develop and support the Friends of Bestwood Country Park group to further develop their engagement in making the park more sustainable
 - c) review current onsite ranger services and grounds maintenance arrangements at Bestwood Country Park, with a view to generating further efficiency savings.

Information and advice**Rufford Abbey Country Park**

2. The County Council has managed Rufford Abbey Country Park since 1969. It is recognised as being a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) and a Scheduled Ancient Monument lies at its centre. The whole of the Council owned park is within an area of Grade II 'Registered Historic Parkland' which stretches beyond the Park's boundaries, especially to the east and south. All the historic buildings constructed before 1948 that are within the Council's curtilage have individual entries on the official governmental list of buildings of historic and architectural interest (i.e. they have "listed building" status).
3. The site is a "park of two halves" with the main entrance, car parks and main visitor facilities concentrated around the Abbey (including the Old Stables Block and Coach House) and a smaller entrance, Talbot Suite wedding venue and secondary facilities at Rufford Mill, to the north of the lake.
4. The park currently opens 364 days per year and receives around 400,000 visits per year. Roughly 70% are from Nottinghamshire or South Yorkshire, though the summer season

sees a rise in the proportion of tourists due mainly to the park's proximity to Centre Parcs and the Warner's leisure development at Thoresby Hall.

5. The park's busiest days are Sundays, Bank Holidays and school half terms. Visitor numbers are extremely seasonal, with peaks and troughs in demand being heavily weather driven, and therefore not necessarily easy to predict.
6. Park income is currently derived primarily from catering, retail and broader commercial activity (including car parking and wedding sales) – all operated in house.

Bestwood Country Park

7. Bestwood Country Park is situated on the northern edge of Nottingham and is within Gedling Borough. The 650 acres of parkland has a richly varied landscape, wildlife and industrial heritage.
8. The Park is a former coal mine site, and as such contains industrial heritage buildings - the Winding Engine House, the Colliery Headstocks and the Dynamo House, a former electrical substation. Restoration of the Winding House was undertaken in 2010 by the County Council with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.
9. An active Bestwood friends group is well established and provides support for some activity on the site, mainly based around providing visitor facilities, supporting rangers and providing access to the Winding Engine House.
10. A community development worker, provided by the County Council with external funding, supports this activity and other community engagement.

Future Options

11. Both Parks have been subject to a range of reviews which have informed the options for the future outlined in this report. These options should be viewed in the context of the following considerations:
 - a) required budget savings for each Park and the longer term financial landscape of the Council
 - b) the operational, resource and staffing capacity required to ensure that the Parks are managed safely and in compliance with legislation
 - c) the Rufford Conservation Management Plan, which provides a detailed assessment of the historical development of the house and grounds, an assessment of heritage significance and policies designed to sustain, renew and reinforce the heritage values of the site. This detailed plan enables and informs future development and fundraising to be considered in the context of the ongoing conservation of the site and its value
 - d) the development of the Council's partnership with the RSPB in the delivery of a new Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre
 - e) potential commercial opportunities for Rufford set against the Park's visitor capacity, market realities and environmental impact
 - f) community capacity to increase its involvement at Bestwood
 - g) the ongoing implementation of the Council's Green Space Strategy
 - h) the Council's ambitions to support the wider local economy and tourism.

The Future - Potential Approaches

Rufford

12. Initial work to review the current commercial, catering and retail offer at Rufford suggests that, whilst the offer enjoys a strong public reputation and generates significant income, there remains significant scope to both reduce costs and generate additional income by reshaping the Park's overall commercial offer. This reshaping represents the best opportunity for the Park to enhance its public offer, and generate the saving levels required by business cases that have previously been agreed by Council. Given the long term nature of the difficult financial circumstances faced by the Council, it is important that the Park makes significant strides towards operating on a full cost recovery basis.
13. With this in mind, it is proposed that potential expert partners and suppliers are approached – a process known as soft market testing - to gauge the potential viability of establishing alternative commissioned arrangements for the future delivery of the catering and commercial offer at Rufford. This process would allow officers to establish the level of market interest (amongst both private sector and not for profit heritage/leisure bodies) in partnering with the Council to develop the Park's overall commercial offer. The process would also help to identify the extent to which further capital investment may be required at Rufford to support long term income generation and cost reduction initiatives, and which areas of commercial development potential partners would see as most significant. Similar testing proved to be effective in supporting the successful commissioning of the National Water Sports Centre in 2011, and Sherwood Forest Country Park in 2013/14.
14. At the same time, it is proposed that officers undertake similar work on the development of in house commercial services. This would support an effective financial and risk comparison of the relative merits of retaining provision in-house, versus partnering with third party organisations.
15. It is further proposed that the Committee considers the outcome, and resultant recommendations arising from this work, at its March 2016 meeting.

Bestwood

16. It is proposed that Bestwood Country Park should continue to develop a number of projects to reduce its overall costs, in view of the fact that it does not have the commercial income generating infrastructure or potential that exists at Rufford. These include work to:
 - a) review current grounds maintenance and site management requirements and costs, and explore whether new supply and partnering arrangements can deliver both appropriate quality and reduced costs
 - b) further develop work with the Friends of Bestwood Country Park Group to explore options around the future management and development of the Winding Engine House and pump room

- c) work jointly with the Friends and associated community groups to seek funding and income to enhance the visitor offer and community benefit of the Park.

Other Options Considered

- 17. Rufford – a number of options have been considered; these have been discounted for reasons of public unacceptability/cost (reducing the commercial offer, reducing the public offer) and/or unviability and risk (establishing a charitable trust to operate the Park).
- 18. Bestwood - the potential of a full transfer of the Park to a community based voluntary organisation has been explored and discounted for reasons of risk and viability.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

- 19. The recommendations enable the Council to maintain and support its existing commitment to secure public access to vital green spaces and community facilities within Nottinghamshire, whilst making required budget savings.

Statutory and Policy Implications

- 20. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (Public Health only), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

- 21. The costs reductions and increased income aim to achieve the existing savings targets of £300,000 for Rufford by 2017/2018, and £50,000 for Bestwood by 2016/17.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That approval be given to:

- a) undertake soft market testing to gauge the potential viability of establishing alternative arrangements for the future delivery of the catering and commercial offer at Rufford, with resultant recommendations to be considered by Committee at its March 2016 meeting
- b) continue work to develop and support the Friends of Bestwood Country Park group to further develop their engagement in making the park more sustainable
- c) review current onsite ranger services and grounds maintenance arrangements at Bestwood Country Park, with a view to generating further efficiency savings.

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Constitutional Comments (LM 16/10/15)

22. The recommendations in the report fall with the Terms of reference of the Culture Committee.

Financial Comments (SS 19/10/15)

23. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Rufford Abbey Conservation Plan. - MRDA 2015

Future options review - FMG Consulting 2015

Nottinghamshire Green Estate Development Strategy and Plan 2013 – 2023 – report to Culture Committee on 8 October 2013

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

C0711