

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURE

BESTWOOD COUNTRY PARK – FUTURE MAINTENANCE ARRANGEMENTS

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek approval to progress negotiations with Gedling Borough Council over a landscape management contract for Bestwood Country Park.

Information and Advice

Background

2. Bestwood Country Park is an area of informal recreation and nature conservation, comprising 690 acres, in an urban fringe location. It is well used by Nottinghamshire people, and enjoys the support of two active Friends groups.
3. Roughly two thirds of the land is owned by Nottinghamshire County Council and one third by Gedling Borough Council. Both councils manage their land independently of the other (i.e. each Council independently carries out grounds maintenance, management of park buildings such as toilet blocks, and supports the activities of community Friends groups operating on the site).
4. The County Council staff team at Bestwood comprises a site manager, two rangers, two grounds maintenance operatives and a temporary part time janitor.

Current Budget Position

5. The annual revenue cost of Bestwood Country Park to the County Council is approximately £250,000. Full Council has previously agreed an Outline Business Case (OBC) for Bestwood that requires an annual revenue saving of £50,000 to be delivered through the exploration and establishment of alternative delivery models for the Park. The saving is required from 2016/2017. There is little commercial activity at Bestwood, and little realistic prospect of significant commercial activity in the medium term future.

Country Parks Service Transition

6. Members will be aware that the other two large country parks operated by the Service are currently in transition to alternative management arrangements. A contract has been signed with the RSPB to manage Sherwood Forest Country Park and to build the new Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre. Members have also agreed to procure a third party partner

or partners to manage commercial activity at Rufford Abbey Country Park, with new arrangements expected to be in place in early 2017.

7. Work to explore ways in which the revenue costs for Bestwood can also be reduced has therefore taken place within this context, and against an anticipated long term reduction in managerial capacity for the Country Parks Service.

Options Explored

8. Given the need to achieve a well maintained Park on reducing budgets, two possible ways forward were explored. These were:

Option i)

Grounds maintenance works to be undertaken by the County Council Landscapes and Cleaning teams, rather than by the onsite Country Parks team. County Council Landscapes and Cleaning teams manage other sites nearby, with plant and machinery at hand, so economies of scale were perceived to be achievable.

Option ii)

Gedling Borough Council to extend its management to the whole park (under contract to the County Council), absorbing relevant staff into its own Parks Division via TUPE transfer. Gedling has a strong grounds maintenance team, a community ranger team and a Parks Development Officer, so possesses appropriate managerial and direct service delivery experience. Under this arrangement, it is important to stress that the Country Park would remain the responsibility of the County Council, and the land would continue to be owned by the County Council.

9. Work to establish the potential cost savings under Option i) identified annual savings of approximately £20,000. This would be insufficient to meet the budget reduction target. Nor would there be any additional indirect significant savings (such as reduced building maintenance responsibilities).
10. Initial work with Gedling Borough Council officers to establish the potential savings delivered by Option ii) has identified up to £64,000 of annual revenue savings. It would also offer additional indirect savings in terms of management costs and buildings maintenance responsibilities, for example.
11. In view of this, it is recommended that officers be given authority to pursue more detailed contractual negotiations with Gedling Borough Council, with a view to a) confirming the potential savings set out above, and b) establishing the detailed terms of a legally binding contract with the Borough Council for the Park's medium term management arrangements. The final terms of the contract would be subject to agreement by Culture Committee in the Autumn of 2016, with new management arrangements commencing in April 2017.

Other Options Considered

12. Several other options have been considered:

- maintaining the status quo - a site team based full time at Bestwood - is not viable in the present budget situation. In addition, a restructure of current ranger and warden staff is required to fit the transitional arrangements required by the changing situation at Rufford and Sherwood Forest. Staff will increasingly need to work flexibly across a number of sites, rather than being based full time on site at Bestwood Country Park.
- tendering out current functions to a leisure management company would be highly unlikely to attract market interest, given the very low level of actual and potential commercial activity at Bestwood. Bestwood Country Park is a local recreational amenity not a tourist destination, and has very limited capacity to generate income, as attested by two recent specialist studies by consultants.
- the option of handing over management of the Park to a community benefit organisation has been explored informally with the two Friends Groups and examined in depth by external consultants. The conclusion was that it would be a difficult and protracted process, and there is limited appetite in the community to take on such a major responsibility. Some scope exists however, for a limited asset transfer of the Winding Engine House complex, and this work will continue to be under consideration.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

13. To support the delivery of the existing OBC for Bestwood Country Park.
14. To ensure that the future arrangements for the management of the Park ensure that it is effectively, safely, and sustainably maintained, and that its current visitor offer is properly supported.
15. To enable the Council to maintain ownership and control of its land holding, and provide a contractual mechanism for quality control.
16. To minimise the impact of financial constraints on local residents and Park users.

Statutory and Policy Implications

17. 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 services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, 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

18. A saving of £50,000 is required to be made by the Country Parks Service budget for Bestwood Country Park beginning in 2016/17. In the current financial year (prior to contract start), one off revenue savings across the Country Parks Service will be generated to meet the required budget saving figure.

Human Resources Implications

19. The proposed contract would not create compulsory redundancies as TUPE would apply, and any staff displaced would be absorbed into the remaining Country Parks team.

Implications for Service Users

20. Previous discussions with Park users indicate that a staff team based on site full time is the preference. Given that this will be unsustainable in future, whatever option for change is chosen, there may be initial objection to new arrangements. These would see teams working on site daily but based elsewhere. This is the prevailing work practice in parks services, and in reality there will be little if any diminution in the service provided to Park users. Quality standards will be built into the contract arrangements and monitored closely by officers. The fact that Gedling Borough already manages a third of the Park means that the proposed supplier has good site and community understanding and is responsive to local needs. This reduces the prospect of disruption to service.

Implications for Sustainability and the Environment

21. Gedling Borough Council has experience in managing sites for nature, and care of Bestwood's nature habitats will be built into the contract.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That approval be given for officers to pursue more detailed contractual negotiations with Gedling Borough Council, with a view to a) confirming the potential savings set out above, and b) establishing the detailed terms of a legally binding contract with the Borough Council for the Park's medium term management arrangements. The final terms of the contract would be subject to agreement by Culture Committee in the Autumn of 2016, with new management arrangements commencing in April 2017.

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Constitutional Comments (LM 31/03/16)

22. The recommendations in the report fall within the Terms of Reference of the Culture Committee.

Financial Comments (SS 04/04/16)

23. The financial implications of the report are contained within paragraph 18 above.

Background Papers and Published Documents

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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