

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURE**

### **FUTURE OF SHERWOOD FOREST VISITOR CENTRE**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To inform Committee of the decision to cease working with Discovery Attractions (DA) to develop a replacement visitor centre and visitor attraction for Sherwood Forest.
2. To seek approval to re-engage with potential partners to deliver a project to replace the existing outdated visitor centre.
3. To agree that a further report be brought to Culture Committee on 9 September seeking approval for the commencement of the procurement process as detailed in paragraph 10.

#### **Information and Advice**

4. The Council is committed to ensuring that Sherwood Forest, home of Robin Hood, hosts a modern and exciting visitor centre/attraction. To achieve this, the Council had sought an operating partner with suitable experience and expertise to run a visitor attraction on Council owned land opposite the Forest site.
5. Following a detailed procurement process, Discovery Attractions were awarded 'preferred bidder' status in October 2012 to build and manage a free to use visitor centre and a pay to enter Robin Hood attraction. The DA proposal supported the Council's stated procurement ambition to:
  - replace the current visitor centre
  - provide modern educational and learning facilities at Sherwood
  - reduce the level of public funding required to operate/manage visitor facilities at the Forest so that available funding could be re-invested in its protection and management
  - secure and create new jobs in the local tourist industry (including many new jobs at the new visitor attraction)
  - significantly boost tourism and tourist spend in Nottinghamshire.
6. Preferred bidder status enabled the Council to enter into formal clarification discussions with Discovery Attractions in respect of its bid, with a view to finalising and agreeing a long term contract to develop, build and operate the new facilities. However, contract finalisation was delayed during 2013 as DA sought to confirm, to the Council's satisfaction, its arrangements for funding the project.

7. The Council continued to support DA by allowing it time to secure appropriate funding partners for the £13.5m project. However, in view of the length of time since the award of preferred bidder status to DA, DA's continuing difficulties in satisfactorily confirming its funding arrangements, and the ongoing need for the Council to secure effective replacement visitor centre facilities by 2016/17, the Corporate Director for Children, Families and Culture advised DA of the Council's decision to formally end its work with the Company on 11 June 2014.

## **What Will Happen Next**

8. The Council remains committed to replacing the existing visitor centre facilities that support the visitor experience at Sherwood Forest, recognising the significant role the site plays in tourism in the north of the County. The Council is also aware of its obligation to Natural England to remove the existing infrastructure from the National Nature Reserve (NNR), a European Special Area for Conservation (SAC) designated under the Habitats Directive by 2016/17. In this respect, officers remain in regular constructive dialogue with Natural England.
9. To support the Council in its intention to replace the existing visitor centre it is proposed that a new procurement process will commence aimed at securing a partner/partners to achieve this. Recent initial informal soft market testing has established that a range of potential commercial partners are keen to engage with the County Council in such a process. That said, given the difficulties experienced by DA in securing substantial private equity for a visitor attraction on the current site, and the current financial position of the Council, it is the case that the procurement process will need to be flexible enough to allow bidders to put forward fundable proposals that reflect, as a minimum, the Council's core requirement to replace the current visitor centre and make good the current visitor centre site, whilst encouraging broader visitor attraction proposals. Equally, before entering a formal procurement process, the Council will need to confirm the level of capital contribution it is able to offer. In the previous process, the Council made available approximately £1.7million to DA.
10. In order to secure an operational replacement visitor centre, and associated facilities, within the timescales prescribed in paragraph 8, the formal procurement process will need to commence within 3 months, and be completed by early 2015. To enable the procurement process to commence therefore, a further report will be brought to Committee in September 2014 that will seek approval for:-
  - the capital funding that the Council will make available for the project
  - the Council's ambition for the replacement visitor centre and associated facilities
  - the procurement process to be followed and the bid evaluation criteria to be used
  - the anticipated project costs.
11. In the meantime, further soft market testing will take place to inform the shaping of the procurement process.

## **Other Options Considered**

12. None. Recent soft market testing has indicated that a reshaped procurement process is likely to be successful in delivering the core requirement of the Council to replace the current outdated visitor centre and improve the overall visitor offer, as well as reducing long term revenue costs to the Council.

## **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

13. To enable officers to establish a re-shaped project to deliver improved visitor facilities for Sherwood Forest at reduced cost to the Council.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

14. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, 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.

## **Implications for Service Users**

15. The re-shaped procurement project will be designed to deliver a much improved offer and facilities for local, national and international visitors to Sherwood Forest.

## **Implications for Sustainability and the Environment**

16. The re-shaped procurement project will restate the Council's commitment to protecting and preserving the historic Sherwood Forest and its NNR.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

That:

- 1) the decision to end the current procurement process and the Council's work with Discovery Attractions be noted
- 2) the proposal to re-engage with potential partners to deliver a project to replace the existing outdated visitor centre be approved
- 3) a further report be brought to Culture Committee on 9 September seeking approval for the commencement of the procurement process as detailed in paragraph 10.

**Derek Higton**  
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**For any enquiries about this report please contact:**

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### **Constitutional Comments (LM 19/06/14)**

17. The Culture Committee has delegated authority within the Constitution to approve the recommendations in the report.

### **Financial Comments (KLA 18/06/14)**

18. There are no net financial implications arising directly from this report.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre attraction – procurement of operator – report to Policy Committee on 17 October 2012

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.

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

C0457