



Report to the Environment, Transport and Locality Services Select Committee

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| Title: | Country Parks |
| Committee date: | 14 th April 2015 |
| Author: | Andrew Fowler, Country Parks Manager |
| Contact officer: | Andrew Fowler |
| Report signed off by Cabinet Member: | Lesley Clarke, OBE |
| Electoral divisions affected: | All |

Purpose of Agenda Item

To provide members with overview information on the County's Country parks to support the committee item on the 14th April. Areas within this report can be expanded upon during the questions and answers within committee.

Background

Buckinghamshire County Council owns (to a greater or lesser extent) and operates four country parks; Black Park, Langley Park, Denham and Thorney (the Parks) in the south of the county. There are no statutory responsibilities on the Council to provide Country Parks, however while the Parks are in the ownership and management of the Council there are legal and operational responsibilities to manage the activity appropriately. These include but are not restricted to Occupiers Liability, Health & Safety at Work, CoSHH, Landlord & Tenant Act, the Reservoirs Act, the Badgers Act, the Wildlife and Countryside Act, CROW Act and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act. These all have an impact on how the Parks can be managed and even require particular activities to be completed.

Since 1999 the Parks have been operating under a policy of operational self-financing. This means that they are required to generate all the revenue income required for their daily operations, while core support services e.g. HR, finance and IT continued to be funded centrally. In the early years of the policy this was not achieved and the Parks activities were subsidised by the wider Countryside and Heritage Group. However since 2005 operational self-funding has been achieved and in 2010 an annual income target has been set each year as part of the Place service efficiencies, driving the development of new income generating initiatives. In 2011 Cllr Martin Tett, the Cabinet Member at the time, made provision for a development fund of £300,000 per year, over a three year period, to be set aside to facilitate the development of income generating initiatives.

As well as the traditional country parks activities, the Parks have established a number of leases to provide additional on-site activities including; 2 high ropes courses, off road Segway's, cycle hire and café facilities, all of which help to attract in excess of 850,000 visitors per year and in 2014/15 the combined net turnover of the lease holders and the Parks exceeded £2.45m.

As a result of the Future Shape programme the Council now needs to consider what the most appropriate delivery mechanism might be for the future sustainable management of the Parks to place it in a better commercial position. That may mean remaining within the local authority structure, moving outside the traditional delivery model or potentially a hybrid of the two. Whichever option is chosen will present its own specific challenges and these options will need to be considered in association with other Council policies such as Corporate Landlord and Corporate Identity amongst others.

The four Country Parks, all based in the South of the County, total 800 acres but there are some very complicated legal arrangements on ownership, that will need to be unpicked to understand fully how the parks might function in the future.

| Site | Area | Ownership | Visitor Numbers | Legal Agreements |
|---------------------------|-----------|--|-----------------|--|
| Black Park Country ark | 535 acres | BCC 40% SBC 20% SBDC 20% LCC 20% | 568,685 | Deed of Use Leases with - San Remo Catering - Adventure Forest Ltd (GoApe) |
| Langley Park Country Park | 151 acres | BCC 40% SBC 20% SBDC 20% LCC 20% | 174,530 | Deed of Use Lease with San Remo Catering Legal Charge to Veolia visitor building Legally binding boundary agreement |
| Denham Country Park | 69 acres | Denham Court Estate:- Freehold – BCC 999yr lease - Buckinghamshire Golf Club CP Lease back to BCC | 127,105 | Leases with - Groundwork South - Colne Valley Community Interest Company - Environment Agency |
| Thorney Park | 47 acres | BCC | unknown | Angling Lease with British Carp Study Group Legal charge to Blue Circle re landfill options |

Finances

The tables in appendix A provides some further detail of the income and expenditure during 2014/15 in the operational budget. There is a current income target of £70,805 over and above the operational requirements to sustain the Parks.

Before any future model can be adequately assessed it will be necessary to fully understand the financial value of the physical Country Parks asset and what costs are reasonably and directly attributable to the Country Parks service.

Reserves

In order to reduce the financial risk to the Council a number of financial reserves have been established in recent years. Each reserve has a particular function but the principle is to develop financial reserves so that the Country Parks are able to manage any financial pressures without having to revert back to the Council for financial support; notwithstanding significant Project funding from the Leader of the Council. Each reserve is outlined below.

- Equipment and machinery* £ 62,000

This particular reserve was established to address the replacement of specific pieces of equipment that were not affordable under the lease arrangements with the County's fleet management and/or other park specific equipment such as play equipment that requires regular refreshing. There is a specific depreciation and spending plan which allows for the replacement value to be accrued over the life of the equipment.
- Maintenance reserve* £221,000

This reserve is in place primarily to address unexpected/unplanned maintenance works that can be inflicted on the parks following severe weather conditions (wind, snow etc.) or enforced closures (fire, site safety concerns, disease outbreaks etc.) where a speedy resolution is necessary to reopen the parks to maintain income generation and access to these facilities.

However £127,000 has been committed from this reserve to facilitate the implementation of a high speed fibre link to Parks. While this is a significant amount to pay from the reserve, the improvements to the Parks IT coupled with planned improvements to the e-commerce system in the HQ Business Unit should enable better on-line sales, events booking and outdoor space hire and should also improve digital communication with our filming customers. This improved link will, of course, enable more efficient integration with the Councils network cutting out lost computer time.

- *Income Generation/Development Fund* *£722,000*

The Income Generation/Development Fund reserve is the residual amount from a funding package provided by Cllr. Martin Tett. These funds have been set aside whilst detailed plans have been drawn up for car park improvements and a full feasibility study for an extensive new visitor facility at the Black Park. An element of this funding may also be used, when necessary, to cover the Future Options feasibility study.

Expenditure to date has been committed for design and survey work (topographical, utilities, ecological, hydrological, soils etc.) to fully inform the planned developments. More recently a full building feasibility has been commissioned and should be available in the coming weeks. At the end of summer 2015 works will commence on a new car park design that will increase the capacity of Black Park car park by 50% to help address the peak period capacity issues and provide potentially significant additional income.

- *Langley Park HLF Capital Project* *£174,400*

As part of the £3.1m Langley Park restoration project, funded in the main by the Heritage Lottery Fund, there is a legal obligation for the Council to maintain the restored facilities for 10years from the provision of the Grant.

There is a requirement for 1 FTE ranger position to be employed in Langley Park for 3 more years and there is provision for £25,000 per year available in capital funds to support this. The residual £99,400 will be allocated to either car park or visitor centre improvements at Langley Park (see below).

Current Development Activities

There are a number of sizeable pieces of work that are underway at present to guide the future developments at the parks. These have been developed following customer consultation and advice from consultants commissioned in recent years.

It is noticeable from the analysis of visitor numbers that the Country Parks (Appendix B) are approaching capacity at peak periods during the summer but there is significant capacity, as is expected, during months where the weather is less inviting.

- *Black Park Car Park*

In order to address the lack of capacity at peak periods the car park at Black Park is being redesigned and expanded to increase capacity from between 350 and 375 to 550 designed capacity and this coupled with the installation of a new pay on foot charging system should have the potential to generate an additional £50,000 per annum and facilitate further access to the parks at peak periods.

This design will be finalised in the next couple of months and will be implemented after the 2015 summer season so that visitor access and income generation from the car parks is not excessively impacted while the improvements are being implemented.

- *Feasibility study Black Park Visitor Building*

It is obvious that visitors are less likely to attend an outdoor facility when the weather is poor and it is noticeable that other successful countryside facilities have invested heavily in indoor facilities so that visitors continue to visit the parks in off peak periods.

Over the last 18 months a number of reports have been commissioned to advise the development of a new visitor facility at Black Park including a full building feasibility design. This new facility would incorporate visitor information, retail sales, education, indoor play and a new catering facility to compliment but not duplicate the existing offer.

Costs for outline designs are currently being developed and will allow a full range of fundraising activities to commence in the new financial year if it is considered that the potential income from the building would justify the expenditure.

- ***Events and activities***

A full range of commercial activities and events have been under development and trial for the last three years – some have been successful and others less so. Key successes include but are not restricted to outdoor film screening, farmers/craft market, firewood sales, family fun days and early years woodland activity sessions.

All these activities require a significant amount of preparation and while they may not generate significant direct income they do provide additional income in the car parks and potentially draw in new visitors who have not previously used the parks. It should be noted that events income has increased from £1,530 in 2012/13 to £23,630 in 2014/15.

Additional activities for 2015/16 will include new and improved hire spaces, party rooms and packages, an expansion of the events programme (programme available at <http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/media/3032150/WEB-2015-Event-Prog.pdf> alternatively copies will be available at the meeting.

- **New Projects**

In addition to the existing projects there are also a number of options that are being considered to further support the Country Parks financial sustainability. These currently include cost benefit analysis of:

- an extension to the Langley Park visitor building to provide indoor seating
- an extension to the Langley Park car park
- the introduction of peak period charging at Langley Park
- extension of the peak charging periods at Black Park and Langley Park
- a new car park charging system linked to the new system at Black Park
- a residential education centre developed in partnership with a local Free School

If these analyses provide sufficient assurances that these projects will deliver the appropriate benefits then a programme of implementation will be developed to ensure delivery in a timely fashion.

- ***Future Delivery Options***

There are a huge number of options that could be considered but these can generally be grouped in the following areas full externalisation, Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) or retaining the status quo. The thoughts of the select committee will help guide the future works in this area.

Initial discussions have been held with some consultancies regarding their future involvement working with officers and members (potentially this committee) to provide a definitive guide to the options available for the future management of these Council assets.

The timeline for the future options assessment has yet to be fully mapped out but a Project Manager is due to be assigned to the project at the start of April, who will start to do that.

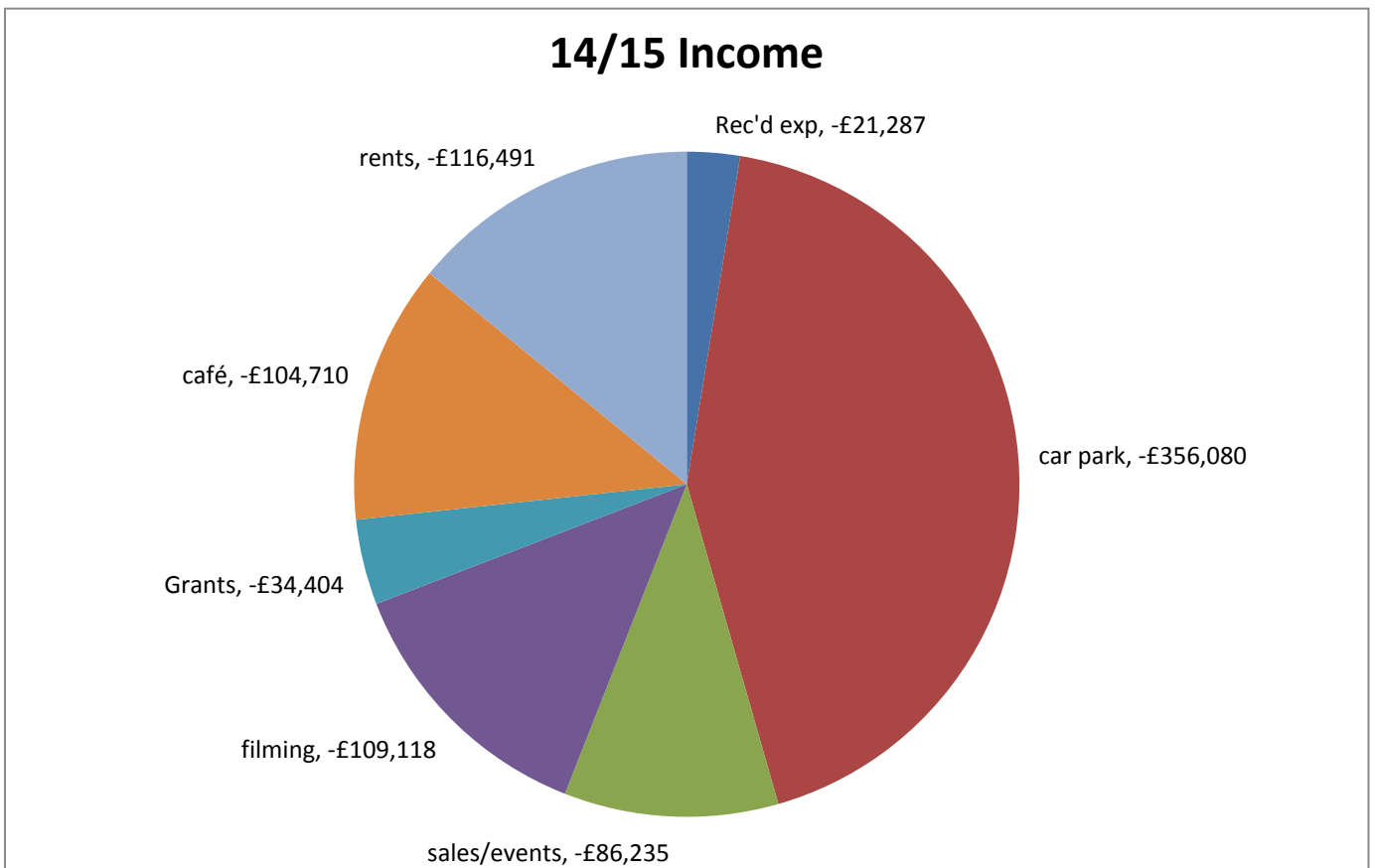
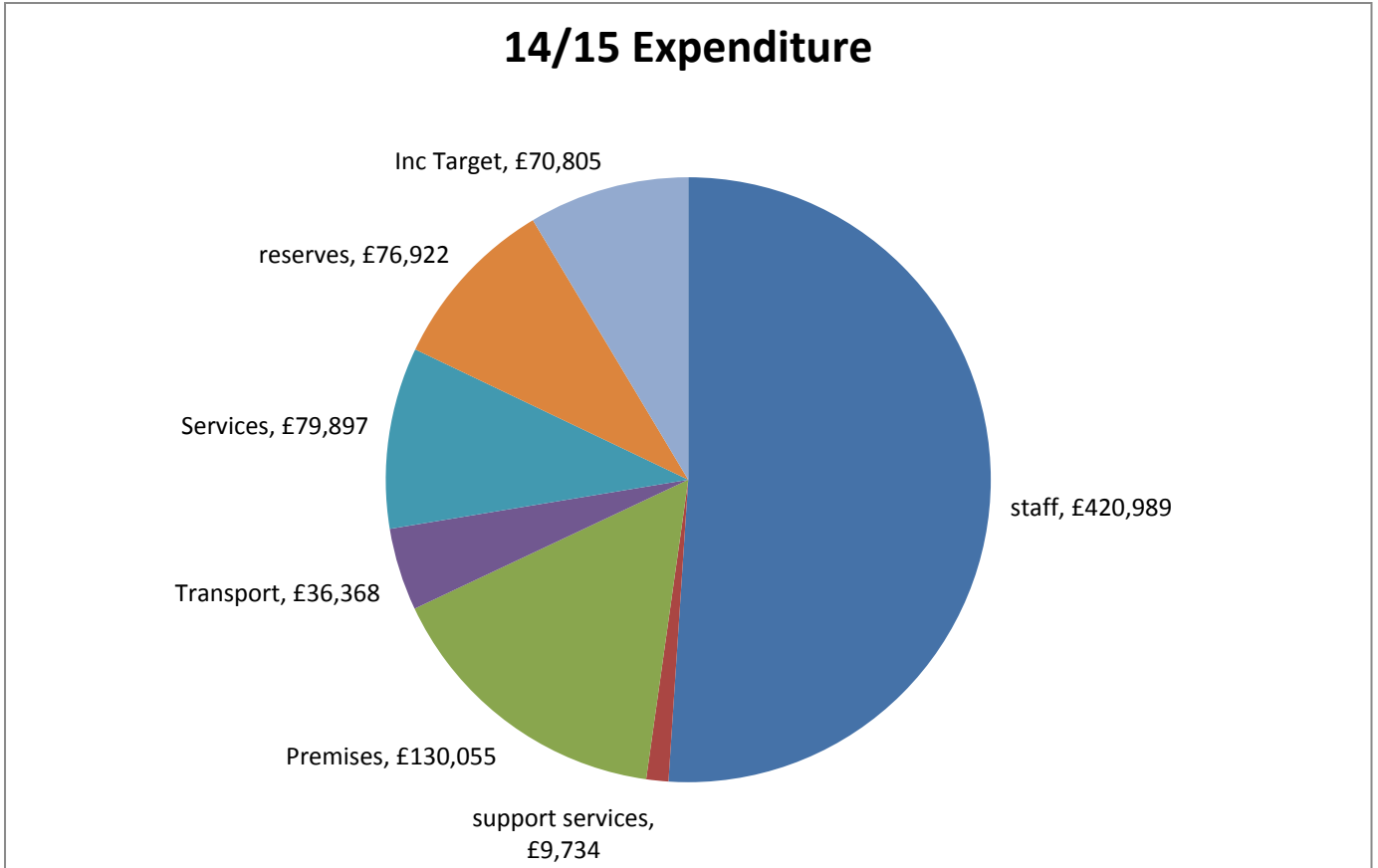
Future activities

While considering the future management options for the Parks, Members should be aware of additional activities in which they may desire an input, be it in an advisory capacity or direct management, from the Country Parks Service. In the development of the options appraisal an assessment will be included to assess the impact of any new delivery model on future projects such as

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| • Proposed Little Marlow Country Park options | Advice & support, operational management |
| • BOZ Country Park options | Advice & support |
| • Denham mineral sites | Advice & support, operational management |
| • County Council Green Spaces | Operational management |
| • Relocation of Hillingdon Outdoor Activity Centre required. | Advice & support if mitigation from HS2 |
| • Working with Colne Valley CIC | Advice & support |

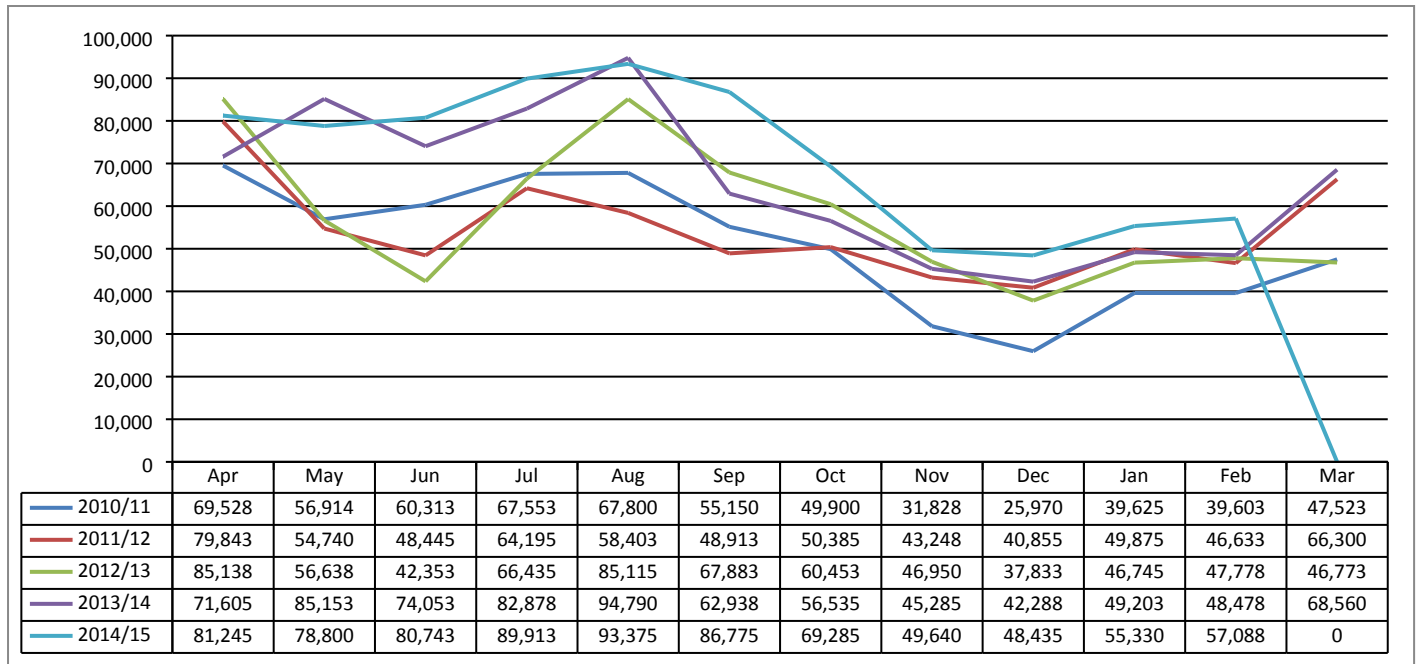
Appendix A

Financial Breakdown



Appendix B

Monthly Visitor Numbers



Cumulative Visitor Numbers

