



Buckinghamshire County Council Select Committee

Transport, Environment and Communities Select Committee

Report to the Transport, Environment and Communities Select Committee

Title: Country Parks: Commercial Strategy

Committee date: Tuesday 7th March 2017

Author: Gill Harding

Contact officer: Andrew Fowler - afowler@buckscc.gov.uk
01753 578 028

Cabinet Member sign-off: Warren Whyte

Purpose of Agenda Item

This item is being brought to the Select Committee to update the committee on progress developing a long term commercial business strategy for the country parks business delivery unit and to invite comment on key commercial options in advance of the key decision to be taken by the Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment to adopt the country parks 10 year commercial strategy and subsequent delivery plan.

Background

It should be noted that Buckinghamshire country parks are starting from a very strong commercial position and have been judged by Planning Solutions Consulting (PSC) as 'market leaders in the field'; this is significant recognition of the excellent work that has been achieved by the country parks team operating in a highly commercial way. The country parks have achieved annual year on year growth in visitor numbers averaging 9% for the last 6 years and this year's performance to date showing growth in visitor numbers in excess of 10%.

There have been a number of significant improvements during this financial year using development funds provided by the Leader of the Council (currently held in reserves). These funds have allowed the installation of an additional 150 parking spaces at Black Park, the extension of the Langley Park Tea Room to provide indoor seating and dining and infrastructure improvements at Denham country park that have enabled the opening of a new café and the installation of a new children's play area funded by the Grndon Community Fund.



Further works are currently underway with our on-site partners Go Ape to allow the development of a tree top nets adventure in Black Park adjacent to the existing Go Ape facilities and a report is being developed to assess proposals to change parking tariffs within the parks.

A summary of the activities and projects completed by the country parks team over the last year and those planned/programmed for the future is appended to this report.

Summary

To plan the way forward for the country parks visitor surveys were completed in the spring, summer and winter and have provided excellent customer insight that has previously been lacking in the country parks. PSC have been commissioned to interpret the results of the visitor surveys, research other commercial developments in parks across the country and provide options for further commercial development for the County's consideration.

The following options have been scored and weighted with consideration being given to site and operational considerations, market and policy considerations ease of delivery and commercial implications. Principle options have been laid out below to address cross cutting measures that would be applied to all the parks and site specific options for the individual parks.

Cross Cutting

Car Parking – the introduction of a proportionate charging policy that reflects the facilities on site and provides flexible options to pay for the amount of time spent in the parks.

Interpretation – Telling the story of the parks providing the opportunity to engage more closely with the visitors by telling the compelling story of each parks history, nature and people through the years.

Marketing – ‘without appropriate marketing the full potential of the parks will not be realised’ specific actions could include a marketing plan for each site, development of new brand positioning and identities for each site, development and active management of the parks social media and website presence and the implementation of a rolling programme of customer research.

Black Park

High quality self-catering holiday lodges – developed, subject to obtaining relevant planning permissions, with a third party provider who would provide external funding for the development using existing expertise in the holiday letting field.

Indoor Play – the provision of bespoke indoor play facilities to complement the existing outdoor recreation facilities but providing an attraction on site when the poor weather might otherwise dissuade customers from visiting the site hence extending the ‘peak season’ at the park.

The proposals for Langley Park and Denham Country Park are smaller operational improvements rather than strategic infrastructure improvements and address some of the points raised by customers in the visitor surveys. These include:

Langley Park

'Visitor navigation and the sense of welcome' providing a focal point for visitor information and further themed trails through the park to complement the existing tree trail and history trail.

'Introduction of natural play' – there are three phases suggested that will draw visitors away from the main car park into the wider parkland to also include further interpretive elements.

Denham Country Park

'Visitor navigation and the sense of welcome' – including new and clear entrance signage, orientation maps at the entrance and throughout the park, themed trails, new leaflets and improvements to the web and social media presence specific to the Park.

'Installation of a play trail' – drawing visitors away from the central hub to explore the wider park and on into the wider regional park via the Grand Union Canal.

Key issues

The proposal is that the business plan will have a 10 year lifespan giving the delivery unit a mandate to deliver commercial services and developments across 2½ Councils – consideration will need to be given to how this might be implemented with the possibility of changes in the membership of the Council/Cabinet and changing Council priorities.

The Governments decision on the structure of local authorities in Buckinghamshire should not be underestimated – whatever the outcome changes are likely to impact on this business delivery unit partway through the lifetime of the business plan.

However, for the county parks team to drive commercial improvements forward, a high level steer from the Select Committee on the general direction of the transformational projects would be extremely useful to focus resources in the most appropriate areas.

Self-catering Holiday Lodges – these would be a whole new venture being considered for the country parks and will require expertise not currently within the County Council but would clearly support aims to become more commercial and support tourism objectives. Having said this there are a number of alternatives that could be explored under this general heading including the scale; small (5–10 lodges) or large (up to 60 lodges) or indeed the style; temporary glamping tents through every variant up to permanent high quality and bespoke facilities.

Multi-use visitor centre incorporating indoor play – while a visitor centre is a more traditional element of country parks' management the introduction of indoor play facilities is a relatively

new concept for traditionally outdoor recreation facilities. This is likely to require a significant new structure in the country park but again there are a number of options including; single storey or two storeys, a modular building with a more 'industrial' construction technique providing a functional building to a more bespoke structure incorporating more design features.

General Commercial activities/projects – much has already been achieved to move the country parks to a commercial operation and this has been recognised by PSC. It is arguable that there are still opportunities to take this commercialisation further; the delivery unit could investigate opportunities such as music concerts/festivals or only consider commercial developments that focus on more traditional countryside activities.

Resource implications

The commercial aspirations for the park warranted a review of the staffing structure in the country parks; this was completed during the early part of 2016 and the new team structure has added 2 FTE for the delivery of commercially focussed activities as well as strengthening the operational delivery structure.

Individual business plans will be developed for each of the transformational projects that will be brought to ASB in order that these future investments can be appropriately considered. However there are options to be considered here too; property lease, joint venture/partnership or BCC investment models could be considered for both of the transformational projects.

Property Lease – this option offers secure income from the tenant and limited risk to BCC but the income generation potential is limited and will be defined by the terms of the lease and the investment required by the third party.

Joint Venture/Partnership – this option requires some investment from BCC (this could come from the 'development' reserve provided by the leader for such developments); it provides shared risks in the venture but ultimately greater potential for income generation.

BCC Investment – whether this is part of the capital programme or through prudential borrowing this option carries the greatest risk for BCC but ultimately the greatest potential for income if the venture is successful.

Members are asked to provide the Cabinet Member with a steer on any of the ideas currently being considered and/or any comments on the proposals.

Next steps

Subject to the financial appraisal being satisfactory the Cabinet Member plans to adopt the commercial strategy prior to the Council elections in May. This commercial strategy will

then be translated into a delivery plan that will schedule the various developments over the lifetime of the document.

In the short term a new tree top nets adventure will be constructed at Black Park this spring and the formal consultation process will be initiated for changes to the parking tariffs levied at the various parks; this is necessary so that any changes can be implemented prior to the new financial year. The latter item is considered to have the highest potential to increase income and help alleviate the MTFP and financial pressures that have been outlined above.