

Local Members' Interest	
J Sheriff S Woodward	Burntwood South Burntwood North

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – April 2014

Chasewater Country Park

Recommendation/s

That the Prosperous Select Committee notes the transfer of Chasewater Country Park from Lichfield District Council to Staffordshire County Council and considers the development proposals in the short to medium term.

Report of Mark Winnington, Cabinet Member for Economy & Infrastructure

Summary

What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

This paper summarises the immediate future for Chasewater from 2014 to 2017, and the strategic operating models that will be fully appraised to lead Chasewater to a more sustainable future. We welcome members input on the development and delivery of this project.

Introduction

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) is committed to improving the prosperity, health and wellbeing of its citizens, and its country parks contribute to these commitments. They provide opportunities for people to access safe, stimulating and valued countryside and open spaces. They offer places to unwind, play, exercise, discover nature and help people to learn new skills through volunteering opportunities.

SCC owns 6 large country parks, including Chasewater Country Park (Appendix A). SCC took over full management responsibility of Chasewater on 1 April 2014 from Lichfield District Council. Chasewater already (and will increasingly) play an important part in meeting the County Council's ambitions as set out in the emerging sub outcomes. In particular; Ready for Life, Enjoying Life, Right for Business and a Great Place to Live. Furthermore, all the work to date has been heavily guided by the twelve operating principles in particular:



- Encourage and support all elected members to be true community leaders informing and influencing at a local and county level to create great places to live.
- Collaborate with residents and communities to identify the best long-term solution to problems, whether that's from within the community itself or from the voluntary, private or public sector.
- Integrate insight, big thinking & planning with partners inside and outside Staffordshire as appropriate.
- Promote Staffordshire as THE place to invest, live, learn and visit.
- Be THE passionate advocate for Staffordshire locally, nationally and internationally, seeking to deal only with the things that matter to our residents

This paper does not discuss Highfields Farm, which is in the south part of the Park and will be assessed by the Strategic Property Partner for its commercial potential. However, Highfields Farm is a key dependency and if its potential is realised, it could help re-coup some of SCC's financial investment into the Park to date and fund some of the development aspirations highlighted in the Development Plan for Chasewater.

Background

The greater Chasewater project was divided into two phases. Phase 1 sought an operational budget for the Park from 1 April 2014 and this was secured and reported to the Committee in December 2013 (Appendix B). The operational budget supports the delivery of a minimum level operating model and a development resource focused on mitigating the Park's budgetary pressure through reducing running costs and increasing revenue streams. The minimum operating model guarantees a safe country park experience for users, satisfying all statutory, legal and compliance requirements and safeguarding SCC's reputation.

Phase 2 is the production and approval of a Development Plan for Chasewater (Appendix C), making it "an attractive, accessible, diverse and multi-functional place where people come to participate in employment, education, recreation, tourism and culture". The Plan aims to maximise the economic, health, social and environmental value of the Park; reduce the long-term financial pressures that it currently presents; and highlight good practice to inform the wider SCC countryside estate and partner initiatives.

Current Position

Following stakeholder engagement and robust insight gathering, 100 suggestions and ideas were generated as potential operational activities for Chasewater in the short-term. A full and robust options appraisal has been carried out to identify those activities that could be implemented during the first three years of SCC's management of the Park (Appendix D). This generated a programme of operational and 'business as usual' activities to be taken forward from day one and can be categorised as:



- Improving existing facilities/services (e.g. education programmes and play area)
- Creating new facilities/services (e.g. walking/cycling trails and farmers' market)
- New concessions (e.g. national sporting events and cycle/scooter hire)
- Exploring and securing grants/funding (e.g. Lottery and Environmental Land Management Scheme)
- Staffing use and future operating model (e.g. role of stakeholders and Ranger Apprenticeship Scheme)
- Increased customer insight

Whilst these activities will help to move the Park in the right direction, a longer-term view is required, moving Chasewater to a more sustainable model that minimises costs and maximises its contributions to SCC's outcomes. Nine initial strategic options have been identified and through the appraisal process, a mixed delivery model may be chosen. The strategic options are:

1. **SCC continues to implement improvements with the resources available to run Chasewater as a country park:** After implementing the Development Plan, SCC continues to run and enhance Chasewater as a country park, using existing resources, generating new incomes streams and securing external investment.
2. **SCC transfers the freehold by selling or gifting the Park, or agreeing to a long-term lease:** This option is not necessarily restricted to Chasewater and could include other SCC/partner land holdings.
3. **A multi-agency public sector partnership which runs Chasewater as an outdoor public amenity:** In recognition of the shared social, cultural and environmental benefits green spaces provide, SCC will work with public sector partners who benefit directly and indirectly from Chasewater, ensuring that they contribute towards its operating costs. This option is not necessarily restricted to Chasewater and could include the whole SCC countryside estate. Potential partners include Public Health, the People Directorate and Staffordshire Police.
4. **SCC commissions a private sector company to help run Chasewater as an outdoor public amenity:** The involvement of the private sector company could range from them fulfilling their corporate social responsibility (providing financial support, volunteer time and business acumen) to running complementary commercial activities from the Park. Entrust is an obvious partner as it already operates the outdoor education centre and café on the Park.
5. **SCC commissions a not-for-profit organisation to run Chasewater as a country park:** The organisation contributes time and expertise, encourages community development and local ownership. It may be a newly created 'friends of Chasewater' organisation or an existing one such



as Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. The Trust has already been identified by Amey as potentially running SCC's countryside estate in the future.

6. **SCC enters into a cross-sector partnership to run Chasewater as an outdoor public amenity, including a multi-sport outdoor centre:**
Linked to Sportshire and the Twin Rivers' Initiative, Chasewater becomes a facility and competition venue for water-based sports and outdoor cycling, offering facilities suitable for international competition, as well as the local community. Potential partners include Sports Across Staffordshire, Sports England, Entrust and individual sports' governing bodies.
7. **SCC enters into a partnership with an education establishment to run Chasewater as an outdoor public amenity and a centre for learning:**
Chasewater will have outdoor classrooms, host regular school and group visits, run accredited courses and research projects, offer volunteering opportunities and possibly become a Centre of Vocational Excellence in Outdoor Learning. Potential partners include South Staffordshire College, Stafford College, Harper Adams University and Birmingham University.
8. **SCC enters into a partnership with a not-for-profit organisation to run Chasewater as an outdoor public amenity and a community garden:**
Chasewater will have a community garden, including a community farm, gardens, orchards, allotments, community supported agriculture and community-managed market gardens. Potential partners include South Staffordshire College and the Forest of Mercia.
9. **SCC creates an independent, not-for-profit organisation focused on raising money from individuals and organisations to run and enhance Chasewater:** Park advocacy organisations, foundations and conservancies play a major role in funding many city parks in the USA.

The implementation of 'business as usual' activities commenced prior to 1 April 2014, and the programme of operational activities started on 1 April 2014 alongside the full appraisal of strategic options (Appendix E).

Key Considerations

- 28 operational activities have been identified for initial action for Chasewater; three-quarters of these are new activities to Chasewater and one quarter are activities that are commonplace on many of SCC's larger country parks.
- An initial list of strategic options has been identified for Chasewater and a robust methodology has been designed to appraise these (Appendix F).
- The strategic options are not independent of one another and could be combined into a mixed delivery model.
- Neither the initial activities nor the strategic options are immune from factors that will impact on how Chasewater is run now and in the future (Appendix G). Where appropriate, these will be shaped to support Chasewater's critical success factors.

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- The countryside estate has a defined and finite resource which will be critical when evaluating development opportunities both in terms of implications to Chasewater directly and to the wider portfolio.
- Aspirations set out in the Development Plan for Chasewater may require new sources of funding.

Conclusion

Chasewater Country Park offers an ideal opportunity to test alternative ways of running country parks, creating a blueprint for their future operation.

Contact details

Ian Wykes, Commissioner for the Rural County.

Appendix A: Chasewater Tenure SSSI & SBI

Appendix B: December 2013 Select Committee Report

Appendix C: Chasewater Country Park Draft Development Plan (appendices available on request)

Appendix D: Options appraisal of activities for 2014 to 2017

Appendix E: Pros and cons of the strategic options

Appendix F: Methodology for appraising the strategic options

Appendix G: Diagram of influences

