

## Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee (December 2013)

### Briefing Report: Chasewater Country Park

#### Issue

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) is committed to improving health, prosperity and wellbeing of the people of Staffordshire and its country parks estate supports these commitments. Country parks provide opportunities for people to gain access to safe, stimulating and valued countryside and open spaces. They offer a place for everyone to unwind, to play and exercise, to experience nature, and to learn and volunteer.

SCC currently manages 5 large country parks and in April 2014 it will acquire Chasewater Country Park from Lichfield District Council (LDC). An operational and development budget has been secured to run Chasewater from this date.

#### Background

Chasewater Country Park extends over 237 hectares and includes a 96 hectare reservoir. It is located in the south of the county near to Burntwood and Norton Canes, and is in easy walking distance (1km) to 20,000 people. Chasewater is situated in a part of Staffordshire that has some of the most deprived wards in the county. The Park is a valued community amenity, attracting around 600,000 visitors a year and is primarily used for leisure and recreational pursuits.

In 2007 LDC were advised by the Environment Agency that the reservoir's dam was in need of urgent and essential repair. In 2010, due to escalating costs and the scale of the work to be carried out, LDC approached SCC for assistance both financially and with the immediate and longer term liabilities associated with the reservoir. In return for assistance, in April 2011 ownership of the land transferred from LDC to SCC with an agreement that LDC would continue to manage the Park until April 2014.

#### Current Position

The transfer of Chasewater will bolster SCC's countryside portfolio in the south of the county. It will also contribute to SCC's strategic outcomes and complement the draft Country Park Strategy by creating synergies within the wider countryside estate.

In order for Chasewater to be brought up to the standard of SCC's other country parks and to reduce its ongoing financial burden on SCC resources, a phased approach has been adopted regarding the Park's management.

- Phase 1 – The smooth transfer from LDC to SCC, ensuring that an affordable and value for money operating model is in place on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014. The operating model will deliver a safe country park experience for users, satisfying all statutory, legal and compliance requirements and safeguarding SCC's reputation. A full options appraisal has been undertaken and a business case written for Phase 1. The business case recommends a minimum level operating model with an additional development resource to mitigate Chasewater's budgetary pressure through reducing running costs and increasing revenue streams.



- Phase 2 – The production and approval of a Development Plan for Chasewater. Through the Plan, the ongoing financial pressure of the Park on SCC resources will be reduced and the Park's contribution to SCC outcomes will be increased. Phase 2 has yet to commence.

The transfer of Chasewater provides an ideal opportunity to test alternative ways of running country parks; by working with external partners and the tenants on the Park, an asset that is fit for the future and provides a blueprint for the future operation of the country park estate will be developed. For example, part of the site, known as Highfields Farm, is being assessed for its commercial potential. If realised this could help re-coup some of SCC's investment into repairing the dam.

### Key Considerations

- 11 operating models have been assessed for Chasewater post April 2014.
- The recommended option satisfies legal and statutory obligations, complements the draft Country Parks Strategy and the portfolio's operating model, and provides an opportunity to minimise the Park's financial burden going forwards.
- The risks associated with the other options (including do nothing, run using LDC model, run within existing resources, etc.) include:
  - Not satisfying statutory, legal and compliance requirements associated with open access land.
  - Service quality declining across the whole country park estate because resources are already spread thinly across the service.
  - Difficulty in managing the SSSI, meaning that up to £250,000 may need to be paid-back to Natural England in non-compliance of an environmental stewardship scheme.
- Chasewater falls within Green Belt and any future development will need to complement this designation. Furthermore, 75% of the Park has an environmental designation e.g. Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Whilst not included within Infrastructure+, the outcome of Infrastructure+ and the Strategic Property Partnership, may impact on Phase 1 and/or Phase 2.
- Part of the Park is still owned by the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation (CISWO) and SCC has now acquired the long-term lease from LDC. SCC is in a legal dispute with CISWO over remedial works to a derelict house on the site.

### Comments and Next Steps

- Phase 1 – The business case's recommendation has been approved and resources have been secured. Staff recruitment and work on a site management plan has commenced, alongside working with LDC on an appropriate exit strategy.
- Phase 2 – Work on preparing a Development Plan for Chasewater is underway and will be completed by April 2014. Investigations into the commercial potential of the Highfields Farm site will continue, along with other opportunities to reduce the ongoing financial pressure of the Park on SCC resources and increase its contribution to SCC outcomes.

### Conclusion

Chasewater Country Park offers an ideal opportunity to test alternative ways of running country parks, creating a blueprint for their future operation. We welcome Members' input on the development and delivery of this project.

### Contact details

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