



Cabinet 28 April 2010

Nowton Park, Bury St Edmunds: Proposed Visitor Centre (May10/13)

1. Summary and Reasons for Recommendations

- 1.1 Nowton Park is one of the Council's most highly regarded and used leisure sites. The purpose of this report is to recommend that an investment in a new visitor centre is made to ensure that the site continues to meet the expectations of customers.
- 1.2 The Council's capital programme includes up to £525,000 for the provision of a new visitor centre in Nowton Park, and Cabinet has already published this aspiration in its plans for 2009/2010. As part of this process various options, around improving the visitor experience at the Park have been considered including a proposal to utilise the existing buildings in the former Victorian walled garden, in the middle of the park. These investigations have established the favoured option as being a new build replacement in the north of the park alongside the existing car-park area.
- 1.3 In the process of investigating the best location to site the new visitor centre a number of other issues have been identified and it is proposed that these be progressed as follows:-
- (i) officers in the Borough Council's Property Services division be asked to review the current asset disposal register with regards the future potential of Gardener's Cottage and walled garden area;
 - (ii) officers investigate further the issue of how best to meet the demand for additional car-parking on site; and
 - (iii) officers seek third party funding grants to try and improve the existing playground equipment on site and the provision of new play facilities which are better/more challenging for older children.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that:-
- (i) the replacement of the current cluster of prefabricated buildings by the existing Nowton Park car-park with a single new building containing a café, public toilets, set of changing rooms, function room and staff office be approved and funded from the existing capital programme provision of £525,000;
 - (ii) the current asset disposal register be reviewed in relation to Gardener's Cottage, noting the need to maximise the potential of the Nursery area;
 - (iii) the issue of how best to meet the demand for additional car-parking on site be reviewed; and

- (iv) third party funding grants be sought to try and improve the existing playground equipment on site and the provision of new play facilities which are better/more challenging for older children.

3. Corporate Objectives

3.1 The recommendations meet the following, as contained within the Corporate Plan:-

- (a) Corporate Priorities: (i) *to improve the safety and well-being of the community;*
(ii) *'to secure a sustainable and attractive environment';*
and
(iii) *'to raise corporate standards and efficiency'.*

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4. Key Issues

4.1 Proposed new building

- 4.1.1 The original development plan for the park produced by consultants (The Landscape Partnership) in 1987 envisaged a much more formal sporting venue with a centre in the north and a further one in the south of the park. Owing to the financial constraints of the capital programme not all of these aspirations have been met. Despite the limited investment the parks visitor figures have grown considerably since the late 1980's to exceed 300,000 per annum.
- 4.1.2 The management plan for Nowton Park, adopted by the Council in 2008, identifies a range of challenges for the future development of the Park. The priority has been to concentrate on the replacement of the visitor centre as the most pressing need for visitors, based upon results of consultations with users and other stakeholders.
- 4.1.3 The current cluster of prefabricated buildings located to the south of Nowton Park's car-park includes a containerised toilet block, a containerised changing room facility a former mobile school classroom (which accommodates the current visitor centre and staff office) and a metal storage container. These buildings were installed as temporary short-term solutions to meet current customer needs. The current buildings are neither attractive to look at or in a very good condition. It is envisaged that larger sums of money will have to be spent on the current buildings year on year if they are to remain open for use.
- 4.1.4 A single building is the most efficient solution in long-term asset management terms, since all issues are resolved at one time. A single building will improve the aesthetics of the car-park and removes the present unsightliness of the cluster of prefabricated buildings. Subject to the proposed new building meeting certain environmental targets it may be possible to obtain some third party grant funding. Attached as Appendix 1 is a location plan of the proposed Visitor Centre. Attached as Appendix 2 is an indicative layout plan of the new building along with photographs showing features that the designers will aspire to incorporate into it.
- 4.1.5 The resource analysis which compares the current revenue costs of the existing facilities and those predicted for the new building is included as Appendix 3. The analysis also sets out the predicted future income levels and the most cost effective and sustainable means of managing the facility.

4.2 Other issues

- 4.2.1 To support the development of the former Victorian walled garden area it is proposed that officers in Property Services be asked to undertake a further asset management plan review of the whole of Gardener's Cottage and walled garden area, with a view to maximising its potential in terms of capital and or income generation. Until such time as this review is complete, Gardener's Cottage should not be offered up for sale and its disposal should be rescheduled in the Asset Disposal Programme 2010/2011 to 2014/2015.
- 4.2.2 Suffolk County Council's on site Social Services group terminated their licence of Gardener's Cottage in April 2010. In the short-term, it will continue to provide an office/mess facility for the on site Ranger staff during the demolition and construction stage of the visitor centre project. After the new visitor centre is completed, it is envisaged that the area will become surplus to operational needs.
- 4.2.3 Visitor figures for the park have grown considerably since the Park was originally laid out and opened for public use. The Park now hosts a number of large events and car-parking for these events and during certain weekends is a problem when ground

conditions are wet and additional parking on grass areas within the site is impractical. Whilst there is currently no budget provision to allow for increased car-parking provision on site, officers will investigate this issue further and will try and find ways of resolving this challenge.

4.2.4 The current playground at Nowton Park was originally installed in the early 1990's and some additional new equipment was installed around 2003. The cost to install a new playground similar to that recently installed at Castle Playing fields in Haverhill would be £110,000. The current play facilities on site do not cater for older children (early teens). Go Ape have been contacted to see if they would be interested in developing a franchised play facility on site but owing to the proximity of their existing facility at Thetford, they would not be interested in developing a competing facility at Nowton Park.

4.2.5 The cost to install an additional older children's play area in the Park containing more challenging climbing equipment, but which would not necessitate an on site attendant, would cost between £100,000 to £200,000 dependent upon size and number of fixtures. The capital budget allocated to building of the new visitor centre could not afford the expense of providing new/enhanced play facilities on site. Officers will investigate the possibility of improving and increasing the play offering via external grant bids. Owing to the location of the Park, on the outskirts of the town, a more accessible facility for teens nearer the town's residential areas might be more favourable.

4.2.6 The biggest problem concerning the current football changing rooms is the fact that there are not enough of them to meet current demand. The estimated cost to incorporate additional sets of changing rooms into the proposed new building would be £250,000 per set. Owing to the limitations of the capital programme it is not proposed to increase the number of changing room facilities at Nowton Park at this time. Should funding opportunities arise to facilitate this need officers will further investigate the issue.

5. Other Options considered

5.1 Location of the visitor centre

5.1.1 The option of locating the facility in the Victorian walled garden was considered and dismissed owing to the limitations of the current budget and the need to create parking nearer to the location and suitable access.

5.1.2 The location of the proposed building in the current car-park area is restricted by the location of underground services which cross the site.

5.2 Facilities within the proposed new building

5.2.1 The option of not including the provision of new changing rooms in the new building was investigated. Owing to the position of underground services (see Appendix 1), were the changing rooms not to be included in the new building either the existing prefabricated changing room would have to be re-located to accommodate the new building or the new building would have to be re-sited away from the playground area. A possible alternative site for the visitor centre is indicated in Appendix 1 as site B.

5.2.2 Given the age of the changing room block the Borough Council's Engineers are not confident that the structure would withstand relocation. There are child safety and retail advantages in having the visitor centre overlook the children's play area.

6. Community impact *(including Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and diversity issues)*

6.1 General

6.1.1 Nowton Park is used by 300,000 customers per annum. It contains a recently refurbished artificial pitch, grass football pitches, a play area and 172 acres for walking and informal recreation.

6.1.2 The Park is regionally significant because of its historic landscape and as a result it delivers fantastic opportunities for everyone to enjoy the great outdoors in beautiful surroundings.

6.1.3 The "Place Survey: England" published in 2009 identified that almost nine out of ten people use parks and green spaces, and they value them. This same survey also established that 95% of people thought it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live.

6.1.4 Improving the quality of the facilities at Nowton Park will encourage healthy lifestyles and contribute to economic uplift. The experience of competing in formal recreation, exploring nature and the landscape and socialising within an attractive local venue will be enhanced by the provision of a new centre. This will have positive outcomes towards community cohesion, children's development and the local economy.

6.2 Diversity and Equality Impact

6.2.1 The new building will replace the existing visitor facility which is in a poor state of repair and does not conform to current Disability Discrimination Act standards. The new changing room facilities will comply with the Football Association's facility standards which take into consideration the fact that the facility will be used by both males and females. The Equality Impact Assessment has found that there are no negative impacts

6.3 Sustainability Impact

6.3.1 The Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) has been completed and no major adverse impacts were identified which required consideration. The SIA will be updated as the design and building materials used in the new construction are finalised.

6.3.2 Nowton Park is recognised in the Borough Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy as a significant parkland area whose importance will increase as the radial and lateral green links into and around town are developed. Providing better quality facilities at Nowton Park will help encourage the use of these green links in the future.

7. Consultation

7.1 Surveys of visitors to Nowton Park have consistently highlighted their wish to see better facilities on site.

7.2 2001 Survey – 85 interviewed

- A café was the most sort after new facility.
- 97% of those interviewed travelled by car.
- 95% of those interviewed travelled for less than 30 minute.

7.3 2003 Survey – 161 replies

- Nowton Park is regionally significant, over a third of visitors travel more than five miles to visit. This category of visitor is more likely to stay longer and spend more while they are there.
- 70% of visitors go to the park every 4 to 12 weeks, which suggests seasonal interest.
- 61% of visitors wanted a better centre, being too small was the most common comment. A similar conclusion was drawn for the toilets, 67% felt they were inadequate.

- The need for a Café was the most popular request.

7.4 2005 Survey – 206 replies

- The main purpose of people's visits was to walk, followed by children's play and events.
- Of those people who have not been to Nowton Park before, the main reason was that they did not know the Park was there.
- When asked to compare Nowton Park with 5 other similar sites in the region, the majority of respondents chose Nowton Park as their favourite.
- The most popular new facility would be a new visitor centre with café.

7.5 2007 Survey – 86 replies

- Main purpose to visit similar results to 2005.
- When asked if a cycle path was a good idea 75% said yes.

7.6 The emerging 'friends of' group and other stakeholders for Nowton Park have been consulted on the proposed development and favour the proposal for a new facility.

8. Resource implications *(including asset management implications)*

8.1 The cost of running the current cluster of temporary buildings by the Nowton Park car park in 2009/2010 was £32,150 The estimated cost of running the new facility in year 1 will be £29,425 reducing to £23,325 in year three.

8.2 If nothing was done then the revenue costs of maintaining the existing facilities are likely to escalate. The full financial implications of this proposed new facility are outlined in Appendix 3.

8.3 The development of this new facility will further the Council's objective of providing quality services at a reduced cost.

9. Risk Assessment *(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)*

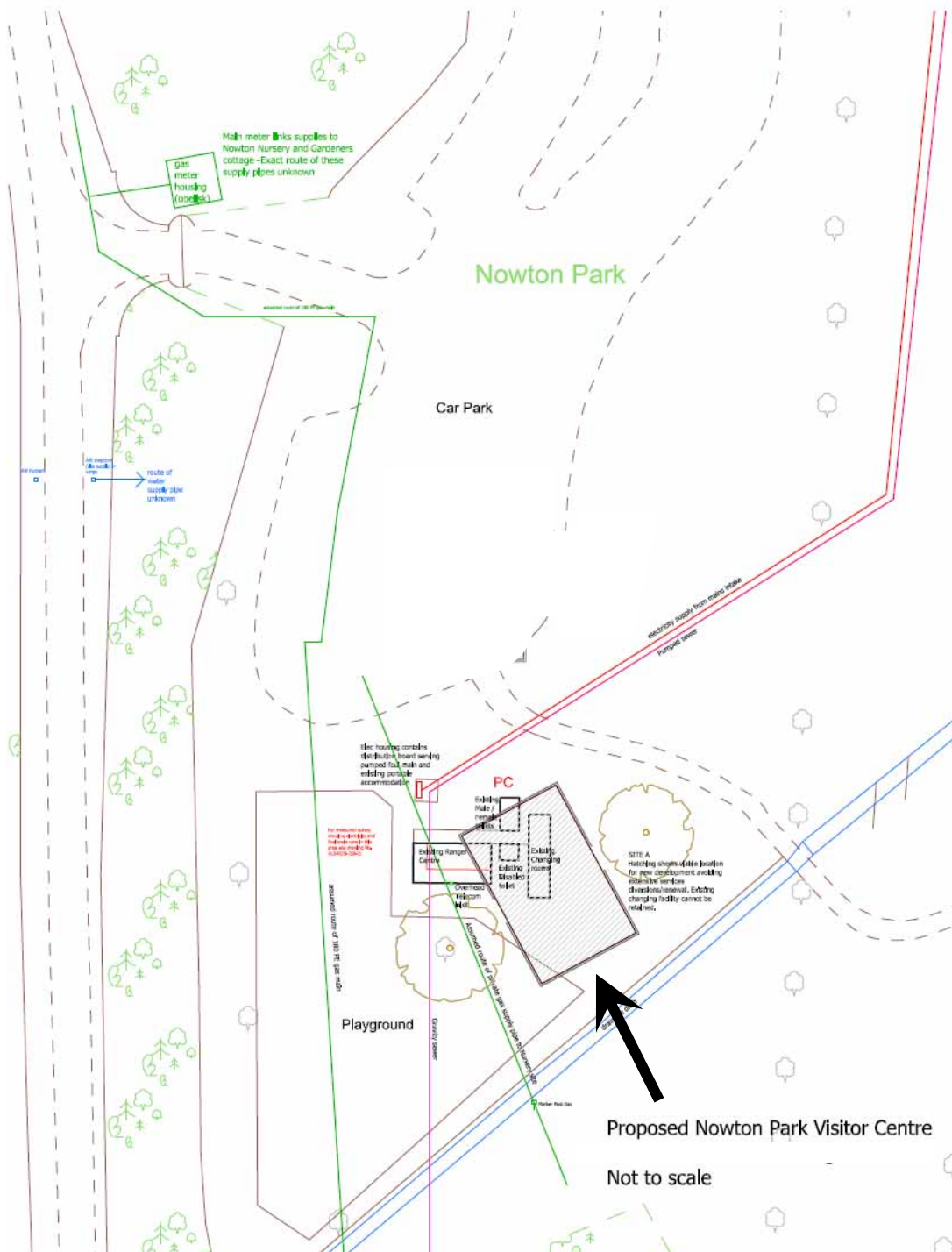
9.1

Risk area	Inherent level of Risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual Risk (after controls)
Current temporary buildings deteriorate further and have to be closed to the public.	High	Capital funding has been set aside to provide for the building of a new facility.	Low
The tenders for the building of the new facility exceed the budget allocation.	Medium	The specification is being prepared by competent staff who are aware of market costs.	medium
New facility does not meet the public's expectation.	Medium	Subject to members approving the recommendations outlined in this report. The scope of the project will be suitably publicised to the various interest groups.	low

10. Legal or policy implications

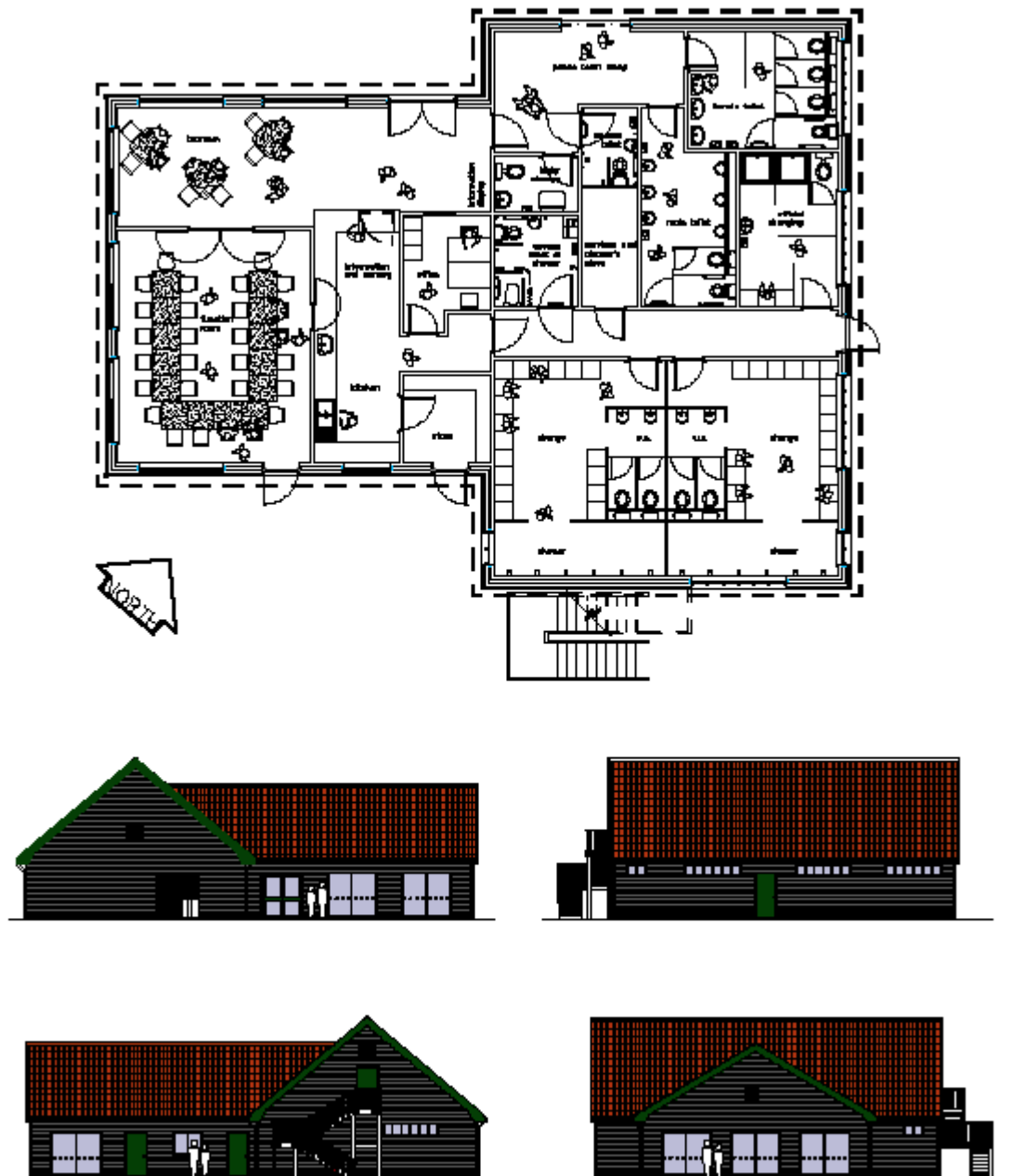
10.1 Officers are mindful of the various legal requirements regarding building standards, building control and planning legislation. There are also the various procurement requirements/standing orders to be considered. There are no other known Legal or policy implications

Wards affected	Horringer and Whelnetham wards	Portfolio Holder	Portfolio Holder for Culture and Sport
Background Papers	Nil	Subject Area	Leisure, Sports, Arts and Culture



Plan identifying the location of underground services surrounding the current and proposed visitor centre

Indicative plan of proposed visitor centre layout and elevation



Single story, timber framed, environmentally friendly

**Nowton Park Visitor Centre and Changing Rooms:
Resource Analysis**

1. Current position

Trading	2009/10	2009/10	2010/11 Budget	2010/11 Budget
Sales		32,800		33,500
Cost of Sales		24,050		24,000
Gross Profit		8,750		9,500

Less expenses

Salaries	17,000		17,150	
Building maintenance	2,600		2,700	
Electricity *	4,750		5,500	
Water *	1,100		1,100	
Rates	7,400		6,950	
Cleaning materials	600		300	
Refuse collection	450		450	
Window cleaning	100		100	
Insurance premises	650		650	
Telephone	1,000		2,000	
Computers	100		350	
Building cleaning contract	5,150		4,550	
		(40,900)		(41,800)
Cost of service		(32,150)		(32,300)

*Utility costs for the current buildings are estimates only as running costs are inseparable from the site as a whole which includes the nursery and the all weather pitch lighting.

1.2 Analysis of current sales

- 60% of sales can be attributed to ice-cream
- Sales are represented by 153 trading days pa (closed weekdays apart from most school holidays)
- The average daily number of transactions is 122
- The average spend per transaction is £1.61
- The average mark up on goods sold is about 54%

Sales figures are significantly reliant upon time of year and weather conditions, takings can vary from £20 to £800 per day.

The current sales break even point after staff costs is about £150 per day. Out of 153 trading days the break even point was exceeded 84 times (54%), however when the summer figures are compared to the winter figures.

Break even achievement:

All Year	54%
Summer (April – Sept)	90%
Winter (Oct – Mar)	20%

It should be noted that the original brief for introducing retail at Nowton Park was not as a commercial outlet but to reduce the cost of having a point of contact for visitors and the opportunity to improve the interpretation of the site. The current facilities were adapted rather than purpose built to accommodate a retail operation.

1.3 Performance within the sector at similar facilities

Country Park Centres can be considered a special case when introducing a catering facility for a number of reasons:

- Seasonality – as shown in the figures from the existing Nowton Centre the winter period runs at a high loss ratio. In essence the private sector would not consider operating during this period.
- Lack of passing trade – the majority of facilities are stand alone venues and rely entirely upon visitors that have chosen to come to the site.
- Customer Base – The reasons for visiting country parks are traditionally for various forms of recreational exercise/experience that does not usually involve a retail element to the visit.

2.0 Proposed future position

Trading

		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Sales		82,600	90,900	99,950
Cost of Sales		53,650	59,050	64,900
Gross Profit		28,950	31,850	35,050
Mark up %		54	54	54

Less expenses

		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Salaries		25,000	25,000	25,000
Building maintenance		4,200	4,200	4,200
Electricity		9,500	9,500	9,500
Water		2,200	2,200	2,200
Rates		8,900	8,900	8,900
Cleaning materials		800	800	800
Refuse collection		675	675	675
Window cleaning		200	200	200
Insurance premises		650	650	650
Telephone		1,000	1,000	1,000
Computers		100	100	100
Building cleaning contract		5,150	5,150	5,150
Total Expenses		(58,375)	(58,375)	(58,375)

Net profit/(loss)		(29,425)	(26,525)	(23,325)
Reduction in subsidy		2,725	5,625	8,825
Loss of interest per year on capital cost of £525,000	7,875			

2.1 Projected Retail Performance

We are forecasting an average of 200 customers per day during the first year with average customer check expenditure for all items of £2.70. These figures are based on the following assumptions:

- The café will attract more paying customers to the park particularly during poor weather as indoor seating will be provided.
- A more extensive and quality menu will be provided.
- 153 trading days.

We expect growth to occur across all categories at about 10% annually as the business becomes more established and well-known, reaching 225 customers per day within a year and more than 250 within three years.

This projected growth is based upon known performance of similar facilities in the region.

The new facility will offer high quality and distinctive experiences for visitors all within a beautiful and significant landscape. The visitor centre will look to encourage people to make greater use of the park and will provide opportunities for all to find out what is special about Nowton Park and how they can benefit from it. As can be seen from the summary table below this is all delivered at a net saving of £2,725 in the first year and rising to a saving of £8,825 by year 3; the team will continue to investigate other opportunities to make the centre cost neutral over the coming years

3.0 Summary Table

	Current facility	Yr 1 New facility	Yr 2 New facility	Yr 3 New facility
Expenses	40,900	58,375	58,375	58,375
Retail Profits/(losses)	8,750	28,950	31,850	35,050
Total Savings/(losses)	(32,150)	(29,425)	(26,525)	(23,325)

NB. These figures are based on an in-house provision model using known costs Officers will investigate further the most cost effective and sustainable model that will deliver value for money and maximise the return on the investment in the proposed new centre.