



Cabinet 1 February 2012

Suffolk County Council's Transfer of Country Parks and the Future of Clare Castle Country Park (Feb12/14)

1. Summary and Reasons for Recommendations

- 1.1 There are two Suffolk County Council Country Park sites within the Borough of St Edmundsbury, these being Knettishall Heath Country Park and Clare Castle Country Park. The County Council has adopted a policy of seeking to transfer its management and maintenance responsibilities for its Country Parks to more local control. This report sets out the extent of the Borough Council's involvement in trying to ensure that there are sustainable measures put in place to ensure that the current County Councils park facilities within the Borough have a long term future.
- 1.2 Suffolk Wildlife Trust has put forward a bid to take on the management of Knettishall Heath Country Park, and officers believe that the Trust are well placed to take on this responsibility.
- 1.3 Public consultation concerning possible options for the future management of Clare Country Park, organised by the County Council, is scheduled to take place on 8 February 2012. This report outlines how the Borough Council has been asked to assist this process. This assistance may require the operational involvement of the Borough Council's Parks Service in the future management of the Park, but only if that is an option desired by the local community, and one that can be achieved on a cost neutral basis to the authority. In order that the outcome of the consultation exercise can be acted upon in 2012/2013, it is also proposed that, if applicable, Cabinet authorises officers to put in place any support and services requested from the Borough Council by the local community under the chosen option.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that:-

- (1) the proposal from Suffolk Wildlife Trust to manage Knettishall Country Park be supported; and
- (2) subject to it being on a cost neutral basis to the Borough Council, and as outlined in section 5 of Report C328, that the Head of Leisure Services, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Sport and the Local Ward Member for Clare, be authorised to negotiate and implement arrangements for any involvement of the Borough Council in the future management of Clare Country Park if such a role is required in order to implement the option selected by the local community through the February 2012 public consultation exercise.

3. Corporate Objectives

3.1 The recommendation(s) meet the following Corporate Priorities, as contained within the Corporate Plan:-

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

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4. Background

4.1 In February 2011 the County Council set out its plans to transfer its management and maintenance responsibilities for its Country Parks and Recreation Sites. There are two County Council Country Parks sites within the Borough of St Edmundsbury, these being Knettishall Heath Country Park and Clare Castle Country Park.

4.2 The County Council advertised its intentions and invited local community groups and other bodies, as well as second and third tier authorities, to submit bids to take over the management of their sites.

4.3 Knettishall Heath Country Park

4.3.1 In the case of Knettishall Heath Country Park, Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT) submitted a bid which outlined their wish to take on the site on a freehold basis and manage the site in perpetuity for its wildlife interest and to provide unrestricted public access. SWT is also looking to purchase an adjacent area of woodland from the Riddlesworth Estate. SWT is applying for various grants to be able to meet both the initial capital and ongoing revenue costs associated with the sites management. As set out elsewhere on this agenda (Report C317) the Borough Council's Grant Working Party has recommended that the Council provide SWT with a grant of £7,500 in 2012/2013 towards this initiative.

4.4 Clare Castle Country Park

4.4.1 An initial proposal was received from a local business for the management of the site and this was subsequently rejected by Suffolk County Council on the basis that there was insufficient detail. The County Council established a Steering Group to consider the future of the Country Park. This is made up of representatives from the local community, including Clare Parish Council, Clare Antiques and Interiors, Clare Society, Clare Railway Society, Clare Tourism Forum, Clare Business Association and St Edmundsbury Borough Council, with the aim of securing the future of the park and developing options for consultation. Recently a newly formed local organisation, the Friends of Clare Country Park, has been set up and is represented on the Steering Group. It has expressed interest in the future management of the park.

5. Current Position

5.1 Knettishall Heath Country Park

5.1.1 Given its distance from other operational centres, it is not economic for the Borough Council to play a direct role itself in the management of the Knettishall Site. In that context, it is suggested that, irrespective of any decision regarding grant aid, the Borough Council endorses the Suffolk Wildlife Trust proposal to manage the site, on the basis that it will not only safeguard the future of the site, but also meet the objective of transferring control to a local community organisation.

5.2 Clare Castle Country Park

5.2.1 To assist the County Council and the Clare community in their investigation of various options, officers in the Borough Council's Leisure Services team have looked at various options as to how the management of Clare Country Park might be integrated with the Borough Council's existing portfolio of parkland sites without increasing the revenue costs of the service as a whole. This has been done simply to enable such a model to be included in the options presented to the local community, and at the request of local stakeholders. If the local community wish to pursue an option which does not involve the Borough Council, then the Borough Council will support that instead.

- 5.2.2 Suffolk County Council (SCC) will be hosting a public meeting on the evening of 8 February 2012 in Clare Town Hall to discuss the following options:-
- (a) the Borough Council takes on the management of the park from the County Council, for 3 to 5 years starting next financial year. During that period the Borough Council would provide environmental management whilst the County Council would retain responsibility for the buildings and upstanding remains. This option would be with a view to the Borough Council taking on the ownership of the whole park on behalf of the local community once sustainable uses for the buildings are established;
 - (b) the Borough Council takes on the management of the park for a temporary period as above, but works with community groups so that a Clare based organisation, existing or new, can take over responsibility in the longer term;
 - (c) Clare Parish Council takes on the ownership and the Borough Council manages the parks green infrastructure on the Parish's behalf; and
 - (d) a community group, such as Friends of Clare Country Park, takes on the running and ownership of the park from the County Council from the outset, with no involvement of the Borough Council.

5.2.3 Options (a), (b) and (c) above would not be at an additional cost to the Borough Council tax payer; the aspiration is that the Borough Council's intervention would be on a cost neutral basis.

5.2.4 Option (d) has no involvement of the Borough Council, unless a separate agreement is sought by the new community group.

5.3 Further Examination of Options

5.3.1 Borough Council leases the Park for 3 to 5 years then takes on full ownership

- (a) This option proposes a two stage transfer to the Borough Council. In the first stage the Borough Council would take on the day to day management of the park and would do the following:-
 - (i) operate the car park;
 - (ii) use income raised from car parking to manage the Country Park;
 - (iii) management of the toilets and associated staff (which are already half funded by the Borough Council);
 - (iv) maintain the play equipment;
 - (v) organise events and be the main point of contact for external bodies wishing to use the park;
 - (vi) provide a ranger service, by extending the remit of the Ranger South Team based out of East Town Park Haverhill; and
 - (vii) work with local community organisations to develop a volunteer base to help look after the park.
- (b) This would be on a cost neutral basis using the revenue raised from car parking and events to pay for environmental management and cleaning services.
- (c) Suffolk County Council would retain a responsibility for all the buildings and structures in the Park in this 3 to 5 year period. It would:-
 - (i) retain responsibility for the buildings (Station Master's house, Waiting room, and Visitor Centre) including insurance;
 - (ii) retain responsibility for the bridges;

- (iii) maintain the designated Rights of Way; and
 - (iv) retain responsibility for the castle remains.
- (d) During the 3 to 5 year period the County Council would investigate options for the buildings in association with the Borough Council and the community. The aim would be hand over the buildings to the Borough Council in Stage 2, once they have been developed/new uses identified for them. The intention would be to hand over the whole park to the Borough Council after 3 to 5 years so it could be run in a way that resulted in no new costs to the Borough Council.
- (e) In terms of options for the future development and use of the buildings in the Park consideration is being given to the following:-
- (i) redeveloping the Visitor Centre/goods shed to house Clare library and possibly other income generating activities; and
 - (ii) using the Station Master's house, either through disposal or a new income generating use, to finance the costs of redevelopment of the Visitor Centre/goods shed.
- (f) Phased restoration of the castle remains is also being considered.
- (g) The advantage of this option is that progress would be certain. It might take time to find a new use for the house. etc but there would be less uncertainty compared to applying for grant aid/Lottery funding.

5.3.2 St Edmundsbury leases the Park and works with community groups who take ownership in the longer term.

- (a) This option could also be on a phased basis with the Borough Council leasing the Park until the community was ready to take ownership. The Borough Council could take on the environmental management of the Park as suggested in Option (a) above or take on the whole Park including the buildings and work with the community to devise a sustainable way forward.
- (b) The Borough Council already has:-
- (i) extensive experience of running country parks;
 - (ii) restoring ancient monuments;
 - (iii) working with local communities; and
 - (iv) organising events and managing car parks.
- (c) Additional advantages of this option are:-
- (i) it provides for extensive community involvement in decision making;
 - (ii) it could utilise extra capacity coming from the community to get things done e.g. volunteers helping with the environmental management of the park; and
 - (iii) community involvement would be a benefit in terms of bidding for funding external funding.

5.3.3 Clare Parish Council to take ownership of the Country Park and appoint the Borough Council's Parks Service to manage the green infrastructure.

- (a) The Park to be retained in public ownership to ensure free access to Clare residents and all visitors.
- (b) The buildings and land will be kept for community benefit and community use.
- (c) The Visitor Centre will be available for use by community groups. Youth organisations

have shown particularly strong interest.

- (d) The Station Master's house will be let to a family with strong links to Clare.
- (e) Clare Library will relocate to the Country Park in order to preserve this community facility for years to come.
- (f) The Park will benefit from the Borough Council's award winning park management.
- (g) All revenues from the car park will be used for the maintenance of the Park.
- (h) All parties involved in the running and management of the Country Park will have impeccable credentials, and will be vetted accordingly by the elected Members of the councils involved in the divestment.
- (i) No element of the Park will be sold to private or commercial interests.
- (j) Local people will be encouraged to participate in event organisation, fund raising, and heritage activities.
- (k) The Park will be run by local people as Trustees of Clare Country Park, backed by the Parish Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council, and with accountability to the people of Clare.
- (l) The Trustees will demonstrate viable and sustainable financial management through their annual business and development plan, which will be proposed at their public annual general meeting.
- (m) Ultimately Clare Parish Council has a commitment to ensuring the financial stability and success of the Park. The Borough Council will work with Suffolk County Council to ensure that a viable and sustainable business case is developed and then oversee, with the Trustees, the smooth transition of ownership from Suffolk County Council to the Parish Council.

5.3.4 **A community organisation takes over the running and ownership of the park**

- (a) The County Council is, at the time of preparing this report, awaiting some details from the recently established Friends of Clare Country Park concerning their expressed interest in the future management of the Park. At the current time it is understood that the aspiration of the Friends group would be for them to become set up with charitable status and appropriate governance arrangements that could take over the running and ownership of the Park. Organised volunteers would become responsible for the environmental management whilst options for the sustainable use of the buildings were examined. The key would be putting a business case together that would ensure the income from car parking and other uses was sufficient to pay for the level of service provided in the park.

6. Community impact

6.1 General

- 6.1.1 The objective of the Borough Council intervention is to ensure the long term future of Knettishall Heath Country Park and Clare Castle Country Park.

6.2 Diversity and Equality Impact

- 6.2.1 There are no obvious diversity or equality issues to be considered as part of this intervention.

7. Sustainability Impact																
7.1 The Sustainability Impact Assessment has been completed and no major adverse impacts were identified.																
8. Consultation																
8.1 The proposals set out in this report concerning Clare Country Park will be subject to a public consultation on 8 February 2012 at the Town Hall in Clare, and have been developed by a local working party.																
9. Resource implications <i>(including asset management implications)</i>																
9.1 There are currently no new resource implications to be considered as part of this report.																
10. Risk Assessment <i>(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)</i>																
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<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Risk area</th> <th>Inherent level of Risk (before controls)</th> <th>Controls</th> <th>Residual Risk (after controls)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Emergence of unforeseen maintenance liabilities should the Borough Council take on the management of Clare Country Park</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>Surveys of all the major facilities has/will be undertaken prior to any transfer.</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Community expectation of what the Borough Council can deliver given the resources it's able to deploy.</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>The proposals set out the resources the Borough Council is able/prepared to deploy, if these options are chosen by the community.</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Intervention by numerous organisations with conflicting ideas as to what should/shouldn't occur on site.</td> <td>High</td> <td>If applicable to the chosen model, a joint advisory panel for the management of Clare Country park could be re-established and all key parties invited to attend and contribute.</td> <td>Medium</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Risk area	Inherent level of Risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual Risk (after controls)	Emergence of unforeseen maintenance liabilities should the Borough Council take on the management of Clare Country Park	Medium	Surveys of all the major facilities has/will be undertaken prior to any transfer.	Low	Community expectation of what the Borough Council can deliver given the resources it's able to deploy.	Medium	The proposals set out the resources the Borough Council is able/prepared to deploy, if these options are chosen by the community.	Low	Intervention by numerous organisations with conflicting ideas as to what should/shouldn't occur on site.	High	If applicable to the chosen model, a joint advisory panel for the management of Clare Country park could be re-established and all key parties invited to attend and contribute.	Medium
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11. Legal or policy implications
11.1 Officers are mindful of the various legal requirements associated with the management of Parks and Open Spaces and the transference of responsibilities. Advice will be sought from the Council's legal services as required.

Wards affected	All	Portfolio Holder	Culture and Sport
Background Papers	Nil	Subject Area	Leisure, Sport, Arts and Culture Environment