

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet - 1 April 2003

Cotswold Gateway Country Park

Joint Report of the Deputy for Environment and Democracy and the Deputy for Public and Environmental Protection

1. Summary and recommendation

- 1.1 This report provides the Cabinet with the background to the proposals for the Cotswold Gateway Country Park and Park and Ride Scheme and seeks their approval to develop the concept with partners at minimum cost to the Council.
- 1.2 **I therefore recommend that:**
 - 1.2.1 **The Council withdraws the Planning Application for the Country Park that includes the Park & Ride option.**
 - 1.2.2 **The remaining application is to remain before the Planning Committee for determination. If planning permission is granted for the Country Park, under that application then the Council should continue to work with the partners to incrementally develop the Country Park proposals at minimal cost and within the existing budget.**

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Council has, with other partners, been developing the concept of a Country Park on land adjoining the A40 focused on Dowdeswell Reservoir. Two Planning Applications were submitted in 2001 and have yet to be determined following concerns over the impact on the A40. This report sets out the background to the Country Park and seeks authority to continue exploring the options of developing the Country Park with other partners.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Council purchased 45 acres of agricultural land at Ham Hill in 1998. In November 1998, elected Members were briefed on the concept of a joint development of a Country Park in partnership with Severn Trent Water (owners of Dowdeswell Wood and redundant water treatment works), the Environment Agency (owners of Dowdeswell Reservoir) and other stakeholders. A number of partners came together in 1999 to develop the proposals for the area. As a key player and landowner in the area, Severn Trent Water have been a lead partner in developing the proposals.
- 3.2 In September 1999 the Council's Economic Development and Regeneration Sub-Committee received an officer report updating Members on the proposals for the Council's land at Ham Hill, including details of discussions with other organisations. The Sub-Committee agreed in principle to the establishment of a partnership and to the concept of exploring a Trust. Authority was also given to apply for grant-funding in partnership with others, using the Council's land for match funding.

- 3.3 The concept of a Country Park in this location had been previously considered by Severn Trent Water to develop the site as a countryside access area and indeed there is an extant planning permission for the earlier proposal. This previous scheme was though more limited in its extent. There were issues to do with access from the A40 as well as very limited opportunities available at the time to provide a joint Park and Ride. There were also perceived problems with the on-site proposals that did not seem to be fully in keeping with the character of the surrounding countryside and the proposals did not best integrate all the land available to the partnership, including the reservoir and woodland. However, the key new change of circumstance involved the water treatment works becoming available to the partnership.
- 3.4 In order to explore the potential for taking forward the Country Park a Partnership Board was established and met from time to time. The project is being delivered through a partnership approach and the principal project partners include Severn Trent Water, Cheltenham Borough Council, the Environment Agency, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and Alan Dick Co. Ltd (local landowner and local employer with a need for additional car parking to support his business). The partners agreed to jointly commission consultants Nortoft Partnership Ltd following a tendering exercise to take the project to the next stage of development including identifying funding sources, indicative budgets and management options. Severn Trent acted as Client for the work on behalf of the partners.
- 3.5 In November 2000 the Economic and Community Regeneration Committee considered a report to explore a partnership approach country park, focusing around the Dowdeswell Reservoir adjoining the A40 and borough boundary. The area lies within the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the Cotswold Way long distance footpath runs through the area. The Committee approved two Capital Bids for funding, totalling £195,000 (£120,000 in 1998/99, £75,000 in 2001/02 and £75,000 in 2002/03 - later deleted) as part of the budget setting process, which was subsequently approved by full Council as part of the Budget.
- 3.6 In considering the bid the Committee considered the initial report from Nortoft which included 3 options:
- flagship gateway country park
 - lower cost option
 - basic country park
- 3.7 The Council and the partnership agreed that the larger Cotswold Gateway Country Park better matched their ambitions for the site. At that time the capital figure of £195,000 was seen as a best estimate of the Council's contribution to the scheme. However, the report acknowledged that the figure could increase to reflect the Council arrangements for car parking and may vary following further discussion with partners.
- 3.8 At the same time as commissioning the Nortoft work, Halcrow Fox had been commissioned to undertake a transport assessment for the country park and to consider highway and traffic implications should park and ride be proposed as an option. This had already been identified in the transport strategy as a desirable location.

- 3.9 The Nortoft stage 1 feasibility study was completed in December 2000 which led to agreement amongst the partners that “a regional exemplar of sustainable countryside recreation development and sustainable transport could be developed and that proposals as a result should also include a park and ride facility”. In Spring of 2001 Nortoft were appointed to undertake more detailed feasibility studies, a comprehensive consultation exercise and to prepare the submission of two planning applications to the Council to support the development of 93 hectares of land as Cotswold Gateway Country Park.
- 3.10 Throughout the Summer and Autumn of 2001 the stage 1 feasibility studies were returned and extensive local consultation processes were undertaken. As a result of the public consultation and further feasibility studies, the original draft proposals were changed and refined so as to provide for two options for development of the site; one with a Park and Ride and one without. In addition other specific points of detail were highlighted as a result of the consultation.
- Reduce the size of the car parks down to about 200 for the Park and Ride option and to about 128 spaces for the Country Park only option. This reflects a local desire to minimise visual, landscape and ecological impact and perceived traffic issues.
 - Seek Local Nature Reserve (LNR) status for the woodland and reservoir areas.
 - Delay the development of the round-the-reservoir path to a later phase so as to allow further research and consultation to be carried out before committing to this part of the proposals. Whilst the circular path is of clear importance to the access for all principles of the Park and was strongly supported through consultation, there are clear technical difficulties that need more careful consideration.
 - Consider all options including the realignment of the path from the filter beds to the fields, or an upgrading of the main reservoir access track.
 - Not to develop a sculpture trail as part of the development phase.
 - Not to develop an adventure playground for older children.
 - Establish two Advisory Groups of local stakeholders to reflect the Board’s clear desire to ensure quality ongoing local consultation and involvement at all phases of the development.
- 3.11 Two planning applications, one application for the Country Park without Park and Ride and the other for the Park with a Park and Ride, were submitted in the Autumn of 2001. In November 2001 the Highway Agency issued directions for both Planning Applications to the effect that the Borough Council shall not grant planning permission in either case for a period of 6 months from November 2001 to allow sufficient time for further assessment of the effects of the A40.
- 3.12 The County Council requested further time to respond to the applications and, following discussion with planning officers this was agreed to. At the same time, both ourselves and the County were considering a draft Cheltenham Park and Ride Strategy report, produced by Halcrow, and comparing the draft conclusions with the contents of the Transport Assessment submitted with the planning applications.
- 3.13 In July 2002 Cabinet considered a report on the outcome of the Halcrow Cheltenham Park and Ride Strategy Study and agreed not to safeguard allocated land within the Local Plan for Park and Ride.

4. The current position

- 4.1 The two planning applications for options one and two are at the time of writing still to be determined by the planning authority. The Highway Agency have now confirmed that following receipt of additional information from Michael Smith, then Head of Engineering Services, they have withdrawn their holding direction.
- 4.2 Severn Trent wish to proceed with the Country Park proposals and are currently in the process of extending their land ownership in the locality to improve access to the area. They have been working with the Gloucester Wildlife Trust to improve the management of the site for informal recreation and management of the site for nature conservation.
- 4.3 The Partnership Board has not met since April 2002 pending the outcome of the Planning Applications. The Cotswold Gateway Country Park has reached a key stage in terms of determining its future. With the outcome of the Nortoft report which demonstrates that there is potential to develop a Country park on the site, the key issue is essentially the scale of the park. Severn Trent are a major landowner and are committed to developing the recreational use of their sites. They however recognise the financial constraints to significantly allocate resources from the Borough Council in the context of the current financial position. The exclusion of the site from the current Park & Ride Strategy in effect rules out significant resources forthcoming from the County Council to fund the Park & Ride and associated work at the current time.
- 4.4 The Council has already invested resources in the area through the purchase of land and the capital contribution towards the feasibility work and Planning Application. Of the original £195,000 allocated, £139,300 has been expended which leaves £55,700 remaining within the budget.
- 4.5 In light of the County Council decision to endorse the recommendations of the Halcrow Park & Ride Study, it would seem logical that the Council should withdraw the Planning Application that includes the Park & Ride option. However, in respect of the Planning Application for the Country Park without Park & Ride, this should be determined to enable the principle of the Country Park to be established and it does not commit the Council to expenditure.
- 4.6 As Severn Trent are continuing to develop their proposals it would seem sensible for the Council to continue to work with them and the other partners to explore options for drawing funding down to support the incremental development of a Country Park centred on the Reservoir, disused filter bed and surrounding woodland. At this current time the Council has not prioritised funding as part of the future capital programme for this scheme due to the size of the budget and other priorities. However, it may be possible for the partners to work together to draw upon other funding sources to develop the proposals. This approach fits within the Green Space Strategy recently endorsed by Cabinet.
- 4.7 As the Partnership Board have not met for almost a year, it is proposed that a meeting of the Board should take place and that the Council updates the partners on its position.

5. Implications

- 5.1 Financial** The Council allocated £195,000 (capital) (£120,000 in 1998/99 and £75,000 in 2001/02) to develop the Cotswold Gateway Country Park. Of this budget £139,300 has been spent to date leaving a balance of £55,700. The Council has not allocated any resources in its capital budget for 2003/04 for this scheme due to other priorities. Funds may be available from other sources, Countryside Commission, National Lottery etc, to fund the development of the Country Park. Severn Trent are continuing to commit resources to extend their ownership in the area to facilitate the development of the site. This report does not commit the Council to further capital expenditure at the present time.
- 5.2 Legal** The Council has no legal commitment arising from this report. The determining of the Planning Application does not commit the Council to proceeding with the scheme, but does enable other partners to continue to develop their proposals.
- 5.3 Personnel** This report does not commit the Council to significant personnel resources to take the proposals forward. However, officers will continue to attend Project Board meetings from time to time to support the incremental development of the proposals.
- 5.4 Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty** The development of the Country Park will provide opportunities for recreational activities for a wide range of members of the community. However, due to the location of the site to the disadvantaged areas of the town, specific measures will need to be taken to ensure that people are not excluded from using the site. The Green Environment team have extensive experience in developing activities which address these issues and it will draw upon this experience. In addition, the scheme, if taken forward, will be designed with "Access for All" guidelines in mind and will enable the improved access to and within the site.
- 5.5 Environmental** The proposals to develop a Country Park in this location will directly lead to an improved environment on the disused filter bed site. In addition it will increase public access to areas of the countryside which fall within the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, on the outskirts of the town.

Background papers

Report to the Economic and Community Regeneration Committee - November 2000.

Report to Cabinet July 2002 on Park & Ride options.

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Accountability

Councillor David Fidgeon - Deputy for Environment & Democracy & Councillor Lloyd Surgenor - Deputy for Public & Environmental Protection

Responsible overview and scrutiny committee

Environment