

Swindon's Country Parks Strategic Improvement Plan

Cabinet

Date: 2nd December 2020

Author: Cabinet Member for the Town Centre, Culture and Heritage
Director of Strategic Development

Wards: All

Parishes Affected: All

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 This report seeks to set out Swindon's ambition for the Council-owned Country Parks, and to create a sustainable operating model in order to provide long-term enjoyment of these facilities for the residents of and visitors to Swindon.
- 1.2 It is important to understand what is required in terms of resource to create an effective and successful proposition for our strategically important Country Parks and this report seeks the support to develop our proposition.
- 1.3 The focus of a Country Parks' Strategic Improvement Plan would primarily focus on the Council's two largest and most visited Country Parks of Lydiard Park and Coate Water, but will also include the other strategic parks. Coate Water and Lydiard Park are critical in contributing to the health and wellbeing of residents and Swindon's overall recreational offer.
- 1.4 The activity supports Swindon's Priority Three: "Ensure clean and safe streets and improve our public spaces and local culture" and Pledges 12: "Work with partners to promote healthy lifestyles for the population of Swindon" and 15: "The Council is committed to safeguarding Swindon's heritage and making the best use of our assets by working to secure a viable and sustainable future for our key heritage assets".

2. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Authorise the Director of Strategic Development,
 - 2.1.1 In consultation with the Cabinet Member for Town Centre, Culture and Heritage, to develop a four year Strategic Improvement Plan for Swindon's Country Parks by summer 2021, which will, when approved, incorporate the priorities set out at recommendation 2.2 of this report, and which will preserve them as viable and financially sustainable assets that contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents and Swindon's overall recreational offer.
 - 2.1.2 In agreement with the Corporate Director of Finance and Assets, to allocate a budget of up to £50K from the Council's feasibility funding to secure investigative reports to support the development of the Parks Strategic Delivery Plan, business

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cases and any required activities, for the future of Swindon's Council-owned Country Parks.

- 2.1.3 To hold a four-week consultation during spring 2021 to allow local residents to provide feedback on, and assist in identifying, the key improvements to be included within the Parks Strategic Improvement Plan.
- 2.2 Agree that in addition to the Parks Strategic Improvement Plan consultation, the three priorities for the Council at Coate Water are:
 - 2.2.1 the cleaning of the Diving Board,
 - 2.2.2 an exemplar inclusive and accessible play area and,
 - 2.2.3 a new waterside Restaurant and Café.
- 2.3 Agree that Lydiard House and Hotel will focus on Events and Weddings, and will not re-open until further notice due to the operational cost incurred by current Covid-19 requirements.
- 2.4 Agree that income from Lydiard and Coate Water parking will be ring-fenced to those parklands for their future maintenance and improvements.

3. Detail

Background

- 3.1 Swindon has an opportunity to make significant improvements to its popular Country Parks, and the Cabinet Member has requested the development of Swindon's first four-year Country Parks strategy (the Country Parks Strategic Improvement Plan). This would seek to ensure that the ambition of the administration is delivered in a co-ordinated, and integrated way across the Council for the benefit of the strategic Country Parks and local residents.
- 3.2 The Country Parks matter greatly to the health and wellbeing of those who use these facilities and to the visitor offer of Swindon, through the enrichment of the recreational, cultural and heritage facilities. Over the last six months, some early work has been undertaken on the operational, financial and end-user aspects of Swindon's Council owned Country Parks in order to improve the quality of the offer, ensure viability and financial sustainability, and draw together the correct group of partners.
- 3.3 In scope would be the Council-owned Country Parks, which include Coate Water, Lydiard Park, Stanton Park, Mouldon Hill, Shaw Forest and Barbury Castle.
- 3.4 Improvement works that are already scheduled, or under discussion, will continue, these are outlined at Annex A. The projects include a range of projects covering

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maintenance, repairs and new areas of development. However it may be necessary, in working up the full propositions for the Country Parks, to change these works following consultation with stakeholders, users and volunteers, to create a quality sustainable offer and then to maintain it.

- 3.5 It will also be necessary to identify and organise officer support to bring together the existing funded works and to develop an affordable, effective and efficient programme of additional improvement works – setting out operational responsibilities, requirements for future investment and commercial opportunities. Recognising the importance of the Council-owned Country Parks to economic, environmental and social wellbeing and subject to Cabinet authorisation, a Project Board sponsored by the Council's Chief Executive will be established to monitor the delivery of all agreed work-streams.

Lydiard Park, House, Conference Centre and Hotel

- 3.6 Lydiard Park, House, Conference Centre and Hotel is set within a historic property, parkland and garden of national interest. It is a significant asset, drawing large amounts of visitors and enriching Swindon's heritage offer. The majority of those who visit Lydiard do so to use the parkland and gardens, and to participate in the events that take place there.
- 3.7 Lydiard House, Conference Centre and Hotel have all been directly operated by the Council since April 2018. The operations have not covered costs and the hotel in particular has required backlog investment to ensure that it is appropriate for paying guests. Covid-19 has placed significant additional burdens on the hotel, where the buildings' configuration makes it extremely difficult to operate in a socially distanced manner. Moreover, demand for hotel accommodation has declined markedly because of Covid-19 restrictions. This is particularly true of Lydiard Hotel, which served principally as a destination for contract or mobile workers engaged in Swindon on a temporary basis. Much of this demand has now gone. Similarly, demand for the Conference Centre facilities from corporate organisations and as a wedding venue has reduced as a result of Covid-19. Lydiard House, Hotel and Conference Centre will therefore not re-open for the foreseeable future, except for a small number of already-booked private events. A review of operations will occur in spring 2021 to consider the latest Covid-19 situation.
- 3.8 Lydiard Park Forest Café and Tea Room are both currently open as catering takeaway outlets. Historically both have returned a modest profit, but the service is challenged by weather dependency and other factors.
- 3.9 The current closure of the Lydiard Park play area has been required due to safety, and is being addressed as a priority. The approval of capital funding is subject to another December Cabinet Report, and the proposed works are subject to a procurement process to enable it to be brought back into use. Repairs and improvement to both the

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play area and to the facilities within the Forest Café are critical in order to support increased patronage and income. Further previously agreed priorities also continue to be delivered which include, a series of building works are currently taking place to the external of Lydiard House and the Stable Block, the Church Meadow Car Park has been resurfaced with further path maintenance planned for the winter period. The three-five year tree survey will be carried out as planned.

- 3.10 A key attraction of Lydiard Park is the extensive historic parkland, which continued to operate on minimal staffing levels during the initial Covid-19 lock down period. A reduced series of outdoor events have been delivered this year due to Covid-19 and consequently income levels have fallen, however, there is a full diary of outdoor events and concerts planned for next year. It is important that the Council continues to support external outdoor events at Lydiard Park, where they contribute to social wellbeing, generate income and in the short term when they can take place safely. There is also the opportunity to use our outdoor spaces further education and learning at Lydiard Park.

Coate Water Country Park

- 3.11 Coate Water is an asset of great ecological, recreational value and public interest. In order to realise its full potential and preserve its future, work will be required to examine the whole area including all facilities and the restoration possibilities for the listed diving board with the support and permissions required to carry out work.
- 3.12 There are a number of operational facilities at Coate Water, which act as an attraction/activity for visitors to the site as well as contributing towards income and other secondary spend. It is important that any new facilities or improvement works are in keeping with Coate Water's status as a Strategic Park, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Local Nature Reserve. The current facilities/ activities are wide ranging, including a splash park, pitch and putt course and mini golf, a children's play area (closed), fishing, café, and a site of Special Scientific Interest (Bird Hides), amongst a range of other activities and facilities.
- 3.13 A programme of proposed improvement work to footpaths signage and other street furniture and an indicative timeframe is currently being prepared utilising already approved S106 funding of c.£429k (*Cabinet Minute 1st July 2020 item 7*). Due to the nature of the site, it is not practical to undertake major works during the main summer season due to the large number of visitors and therefore most works will be targeted for the spring and the autumn periods although consideration will still need to be given to nesting birds and ground conditions at the time.
- 3.14 None of the proposed works detailed above would in themselves deliver the requirement to produce a balanced budget at Coate Water and the Project Board will need to consider specific commercialisation activities to support this aim. Car parking

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fees would be brought in line with Lydiard, linked to the completion of improvement works. Income from Lydiard and Coate Water parking will be ring-fenced for future Park maintenance and improvements.

- 3.15 There is an additional sum of £650k of S106 funding from the Badbury Park development agreement earmarked towards non-specific off-site provision of sports facilities including formal sports pitches, changing rooms and car parking. This sum has been allocated (*Cabinet Minute 78 April 2020*) to help facilitate the development of the new Sports Hub at Moredon Recreation Ground in lieu of some of the capital funding to be set against the proposed new housing development at Moredon. A capital receipt to the same value of S106 from Moredon Housing development, subject to cabinet approval, be used at Coate Water to offer further capital improvements such as a larger play area, new/improved Restaurant/café or other commercial/ leisure developments.
- 3.16 Coate Water has not been subject to any significant investment in the overall site since the 1970s (except for the Splash Park) and therefore there are many areas that need to be refurbished. Whilst £429k is a significant sum of money, the legal requirements of the S106 agreement mean that the Council cannot fully prioritise the works that need to be addressed, and hence the capital receipt from the Moredon Housing development must be considered essential to the project.
- 3.17 One of the most popular facilities at Coate Water has been the children's play area, which was located on the east bank of the lake. The play area is now closed and the equipment has been removed. There is an opportunity to relocate this to a new more accessible position nearer to the public toilets, refreshment kiosk and car park. Once re-located there will be opportunities to consider the former play area site for other uses. The ambition is for the relocated site to be an exemplary inclusive play area for all families and children's ability to use and enjoy.
- 3.18 To provide a new, challenging and exciting play facility that would act as a major draw to visitors and worthy of a location like Coate Water, there would need to be a considerable investment over and above the £60k already allocated (within the £429k referred to above), and one that will be considered as part of the Parks Strategic Improvement Plan and likely to be the subject to a future capital bid. To support this activity, it will be necessary to maximise the funding opportunities from the S106 budgets along with potential phasing of the work as and when further resources may become available.
- 3.19 Another key area for consideration in terms of increasing income generation as well as improving customer satisfaction would be the development of a new/ improved Restaurant / Café facility near to the existing refreshment kiosk. A feasibility study would be required to allow this work to develop to the next stage.

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- 3.20 The administration has been clear that these improvements are a priority to be delivered, and that officers should develop a financial viable business case as soon as is practically possible and take into account the potential restrictions and specific site interests of Coate Water.
- 3.21 At Coate Water, the objective will be to deliver visible improvements, and at the very latest, the inclusive Play Park should be ready by summer 2021, cleaning of the diving board during 2022, and an improved café open by Summer 2023. The delivery by these dates will be subject to procurement, funding, correct management of site constraints and any planning applications and other statutory permissions, where required.

Other Strategic Country Parks

- 3.22 The Council is also responsible for the operation and maintenance of other strategic Country Parks, including Stanton Park, Mouldon Hill, Shaw Forest and Barbury Castle. Each of these Country Parks performs a unique role in catering for elements of Swindon's leisure and recreational needs. The Country Parks Strategic Improvement Plan will consider the role that each of these facilities plays, and how they would continue to be supported to deliver the greatest opportunities for economic, social and environmental impact for Swindon in the future.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 These will be worked through in the Country Parks Strategic Improvement Plan, the alternative to this would be to continue to support these assets in their current form however under this option the opportunity for the Council to improve the resident, leisure and visitor offer for Swindon may be lost.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 Feasibility budgets of up to £50K will be utilised to secure investigative reports to support the development of the Strategic Improvement Plan for the future of Swindon's Council owned Country Parks. Reimbursement of expenditure incurred will be made to the feasibility budget reserves from any future agreed capital improvement workstream in accordance with the Councils adopted procedure.
- 5.2 Under the currently agreed Capital Programme funding is in place for schemes at Barbury Castle, Coate Water, Moulden Hill, Pentylands Country Park, and Lydiard Park. it is proposed that these existing and agreed schemes will continue as scheduled, but it may be necessary for some changes to be made following public consultation as part of the development of a Country Parks Strategic Improvement Plan.

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- 5.3 Funding for future improvement works will be subject to the submission and approval of business cases with all capital funding only allocated in accordance with the Council's adopted procedure.
 - 5.4 The review scheduled for Spring 2021 set out in paragraph 3.7 will inform the range of ongoing operations at Lydiard House and Park. This will assess the latest Covid-19 situation and its impact for the Hotel and Conference Centre. During normal budgetary years the Hotel and Conference Centre is run at a cost of £250k per annum on average.
 - 5.5 Procurement of any improvement works will be undertaken in accordance with Council approved protocols.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.6 There are no known human rights implications and it is believed the recommendations are compatible with Convention rights

Climate Change Impact

- 5.7 Officers will work through the requirements of carbon reduction as a result of the Strategic Improvement Plan and bring back mitigating proposals for the Cabinet Member to consider.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.8 Council staff currently directly manage all the Country Parks and any implications to them will be considered as part of the strategic delivery plan for the Country Parks. There is no immediate change proposed to the staffing arrangements.
- 5.9 If the decision is taken to only run Lydiard House as a day venue, there would be potential staffing implications for staff currently working in the Hotel, if this is the case a full consultation exercise with all relevant staff would take place recognising all potential opportunities.

Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.10 If approved, any strategic delivery plan for the Country Parks will be informed by a Diversity Impact Assessment, focussing on ensuring that these facilities are accessible to all.

Risk Management

- 5.11 There is a risk that without the focus of the Project Board and resourcing the delivery of the strategic plan that improvements will not be undertaken and the economic, environmental and social benefits that these Country Parks offer for Swindon will not be secured.

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6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Corporate Director of Finance and Assets (s151 officer) and Chief Legal Officer (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

8. Appendices

- 8.1 Annex A – Parkland Project Proposals

9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan

- 9.1 This is a Key Decision and is included in the Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan for December 2020.