

Swindon's Country Parks - Future Operational Model

Cabinet

Date: 16th June 2016

Author:	Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Skills and Board Director Resources
Wards:	All
Locality Affected:	All
Parishes Affected:	All

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1. This report presents specific proposals for the introduction of car parking charges at Lydiard House and Park and Coate Water Country Park, agreed in principle by Cabinet and Council in February 2016. The proposals recognise feedback from a public consultation, the results of which are outlined in the report.
- 1.2. The report also asks Cabinet to confirm its acceptance of a range of lease durations that may be offered by a future operator of Lydiard House and Park. This recognises the need to be mindful of the designation of Lydiard as an "Asset of Community Value" under the Localism Act, which can impact on the process to be followed to transfer the running of the facility to another operator.
- 1.3. These activities form part of the Council's strategy of growing the economy and attracting new income streams and will contribute directly to the objective of securing a sustainable future for Swindon's cultural assets, including country parks.

2. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note that the timeline for the submission of bids for the future running of Lydiard House and Park has been extended until 8 July 2016, for the reasons detailed in paragraph 3.1 of the report;
- 2.2 Approve the introduction of car parking charges at Lydiard House and Park and Coate Water Country Park from 1 July 2016, using the charging structure set out under paragraph 3.4;
- 2.3 Request that a further report be brought to Cabinet in December 2016 following a review of practical issues arising from the implementation of car parking charges, to highlight any lessons learnt for future arrangements;
- 2.4 Noting the current designation of Lydiard House and Park as an Asset of Community Value, agrees that the Council confirms to potentially interested parties that it is willing to consider a "relevant disposal" through a lease of greater than 25 years to a third party, which will trigger a 6 week 'interim moratorium' period during which any qualifying community group is able to express an interest in potentially running the site.

Further information on the subject of this report can be obtained from Stuart McKellar, Direct Dial 01793 463300, smckellar@swindon.gov.uk.

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3. Detail

- 3.1 Cabinet has previously approved that officers should seek bids from parties interested in taking over the running, but not the ownership, of Lydiard House and Park, with the objective of securing a sustainable future for the facility that does not rely on financial support from Swindon Borough Council. The original timeline envisaged Cabinet determining the preferred bidder at this June meeting. However, it has taken longer than anticipated to arrange for specialist surveyors to assess the House and prepare a detailed report on its condition, which has meant that the timeline for the submission of bids has been moved to 8 July. This will enable a detailed assessment of all bids received in order to inform a decision by Cabinet in September on the preferred approach.
- 3.2 In the meantime, work has continued to consult with residents and users on the detailed arrangements for introducing car park charges at both Lydiard and Coate Water Country Park, approved in principle by Cabinet and Council in February 2016 as part of the 2016/17 budget. The target income in a full year was set at £400k across both sites.

Car Parking Charges at Lydiard and Coate Water

- 3.3 A public consultation on the introduction of car parking charges was undertaken between [insert dates]. Detailed results of the consultation are set out in Appendices 1 and 2, with the headlines being as follows;

Survey returns	976 Lydiard	603 Coate
Annual car count	333,000 Lydiard	187,000 Coate

Lydiard House and Park

- 3.3.1 Parking charging would be acceptable to 50% of respondents (9% think a good idea and 41% accept the need). 23% strongly oppose the principle of charging.
- 3.3.2 Charging model – fixed amount for 2 hours preferred by 48%
- 3.3.3 61% think a reasonable charge per visit would be less than £2 per visit, 21% think £2-£3
- 3.3.4 50% would support a season ticket across both Lydiard and Coate
- 3.3.5 50% think a reasonable season ticket charge would be up to £50, 17% think £50-£100.

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Coate Water

- 3.3.6 Parking charging would be acceptable to 42% of respondents (6% think a good idea and 36% accept the need for it). 32% strongly oppose the principle of charging.
- 3.3.7 Charging model – fixed amount for 2 hours preferred by 43%
- 3.3.8 32% think a reasonable charge per visit would be less than £1 per visit, 37% think £1-£1.50
- 3.3.9 48% would support a season ticket across both Lydiard and Coate
- 3.3.10 48% think a reasonable season ticket charge would be up to £50, 13% think £50-£100.
- 3.4 Based on the survey feedback, while recognising the need to secure income of around £400k in a full year to help balance the Council's budget and ensure a sustainable future for the facilities, the following charging structure is proposed for implementation on 1 July. Given that this will be an entirely new model of operation at the facilities, it is impossible to predict the level of income that this will generate with any degree of certainty. However, it is believed that income realised could be in the order of £250k - £300k during 2016/17 and around £400k in a full financial year. These figures allow for additional one-off and ongoing costs of operating the proposed scheme.

Lydiard	Coate
£2 for up to 2 hours	£1 for up to 2 hours
£4 all day	£2 all day
£45 annual season ticket [£30 for 1/7/16 – 31/3/17]	£30 annual season ticket [£20 for 1/7/16 – 31/3/17]
£60 annual season ticket for both sites [£40 for 1/7/16 – 31/3/17]	

- 3.5 In preparation for the introduction of car parking charges, improvements are being made to the car park areas at both sites at an estimated cost of £100k. With charges being introduced from 1 July, it is proposed that the details of the scheme, including feedback from users and local residents, take up and level of income achieved against the target, will be reviewed in the Autumn by the Council working together with the preferred partner for the future operation of

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Lydiard House and Park. At this stage, it is assumed that the charges will continue at the level proposed until 31 March 2017.

- 3.6 The consultation has highlighted a number of current user groups who would be impacted by the introduction of car parking charges, including visitors to Lydiard Conference Centre and St Mary's church, Abbeymeads Football Club, Park Run, Coate Fishers, sailing and rowing clubs. It is proposed that officers continue to liaise with representatives of these groups to identify ways of accommodating their needs for staff and volunteers, for example through offering block tickets. However, Cabinet is advised that the scope to offer dispensations from the proposed charging policy without significantly compromising the scheme's practical operation and income potential is minimal.
- 3.7 Assuming that Cabinet agrees the recommendations in this report, signage will be introduced at Lydiard Park and Coate Water to highlight the introduction of car parking charges from 1 July. Enforcement activity will commence on the first day of charging.

Lydiard House and Park – Operator's Lease

- 3.8 Lydiard House and Park is registered as an Asset of Community Value. This requires that if the Council declares an intention to 'sell' Lydiard or grant a lease of more than 25 years, a process needs to be put in place to give community groups the opportunity to bid to take over the running of the facility. The process the Council is currently adopting to secure bids for the future operation of the site is already open to community groups, but this has not yet been formally linked to Lydiard's designation as an Asset of Community Value.
- 3.9 Cabinet has previously agreed some key principles that the Council, residents and key stakeholders would wish to see addressed in any bid, as follows;
- 3.9.1 Secure a sustainable future for Lydiard House and Park within the Council's ownership that does not rely on an on-going Council subsidy;
- 3.9.2 Safeguard the historical importance of the Lydiard House Museum and its collections and the Walled Garden and ensure they remain accessible to the general public;
- 3.9.3 Protect the historic landscape and structures within the Park, which were restored as part of the £5.1m Heritage Lottery Fund Project, and reflect the long-term plans for Lydiard Park submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2005;
- 3.9.4 Allow the continuation of public access to the park and grounds;
- 3.9.5 Address the on-going maintenance and repair of the House and Park.

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- 3.10 These criteria have deliberately not stipulated any particular length of lease, in order to ensure bidders have the maximum possible flexibility to develop proposals that will best ensure Lydiard's long-term sustainable future. It is therefore possible that bidders will request a lease of more than 25 years when they submit their final proposals by 8th July, which would trigger the Asset of Community Value process if the bid was acceptable against all the criteria.
- 3.11 In anticipation of this possibility, Cabinet is asked to agree that the Council may wish to grant a lease for more than 25 years and make this public declaration. This will trigger an initial 6 week moratorium, during which no decision can be made to transfer the running of the asset to another operator under a lease which includes this term.
- 3.12 If any "qualifying community group" (broadly, a local community group or parish council) comes forward during that 6 week period and requests the opportunity to bid, a six month period will be allowed for a bid to be prepared and assessed. It should be noted that the current process to identify a partner for Lydiard can continue alongside the Asset of Community Value process and the Council is not obliged to accept a community bid, even if one is brought forward.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 Cabinet could decide only to make available a lease or leases for Lydiard House and Park of less than 25 years, thus ensuring that there is no impact on the site's designation as an Asset of Community Value. However, it is felt that this could both stifle options that could secure significant investment in the facility and limit the potential for local groups to develop community-based proposals. On this basis, it is felt preferable to leave the option of a lease with a greater term than 25 years available to bidders.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 The direct financial implications are set out in the body of the report and are part of delivering the Council's approved budget for 2016-17.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 All legal and human rights considerations have been taken fully into account in compiling this report. It is considered that the recommendations of this report are compatible with Convention rights.

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

- 5.3 Where there are such implications these have been reflected in the body of the report.

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Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) has been produced as part of the process to seek partners for enhancing the offer at Lydiard House and Park. A specific DIA has been developed in relation to the introduction of car parking charges. This highlights that no groups with protected characteristics will be adversely impacted by the proposals in this report. Pay and display ticket machines are being introduced in multiple locations across both Lydiard and Coate with a view to ease of access and use for individuals with disabilities. A copy of the full DIA can be accessed through the Council's website.

Risk Management

- 5.5 Any risks arising from the proposals contained within this report will be managed through their implementation, taking into consideration feedback from the consultation exercise.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

8. Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix 1 – Response to consultation on introduction of car parking charges at Lydiard Park and Coate Water
- 8.2 Appendix 2 – Country Park car parking season ticket comparison

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 2015.