

## HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

### Report

<b>Committee/Panel:</b>	Sir George Staunton Country Park Joint Management Committee
<b>Date:</b>	23 June 2014
<b>Title:</b>	Sir George Staunton Country Park - Joint Management Arrangements Beyond 2015
<b>Reference:</b>	5930
<b>Report From:</b>	Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

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#### 1. Summary

1.1. At the two most recent meetings of the Joint Management Committee, members have discussed the forthcoming end of the current Joint Management Arrangements Agreement for Sir George Staunton Country Park in March 2015. Members have begun to consider the most effective way for members of the partnership to contribute to the management of the Park in the future. The purpose of this report is to consider these issues more formally with a view to presenting a recommendation to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside for a decision.

#### 2. Contextual information

2.1. The current Joint Management Agreement for Sir George Staunton Country Park was agreed by the partners in 2003 and runs to 31 March 2015. The Agreement sets out that the functions delegated to the Joint Management Committee are: “the provision of recreational facilities within the Park further to section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 and all ancillary powers”. The Agreement continues; “the discharge of these functions shall include the carrying out of estate management operations, farming operations and woodland management operations within the boundary of the Park. The discharge of these functions shall also include the provision of open air education and other community activities principally to meet the needs of the residents of south-east Hampshire.”

2.2. The Agreement establishes the Joint Management Committee as the means by which these functions shall be discharged.

- 2.3. The context for the work of the Park has changed significantly since 2003, particularly over the past three years. The pressure on the budgets of members of the partnerships has increased and is set to continue to do so in coming years. The Park has responded well to this challenge and is in a strong position. This is due in no small part to the careful stewardship provided by members of the JMC, past and present. This last year has seen a particularly significant increase in income at the Park, which, together with careful management of expenditure, has enabled the deficit in the Park's Reserves to be cleared. The Business Manager and the team have worked hard and employed some new ideas to make this happen, but investment in new initiatives such as the Play Barn and other park infrastructure and facilities has certainly helped.
- 2.4. These changes have helped to balance the budget at the end of the year; however the Park is still reliant upon an annual contribution of £167,970 from the partner authorities. 91% of this revenue support is provided by Hampshire County Council, an increase in proportion of the contribution by 10% since the current arrangements were agreed in 2003.
- 2.5. Currently (2014/15), HCC's revenue contribution to the Staunton partnership is £152,000 which is one third of the whole revenue support the County Council provides for its six country parks, and almost twice the amount allocated for any other park.
- 2.6. In addition, HCC's contribution includes the 'below the line' costs required to run the park, such as senior management, financial management, legal costs, HR, staff development, IT, procurement and property management.
- 2.7. Hampshire County Council, through the Countryside Service, is committed to ensuring that all the parks have a long and viable future. This requires moving to a position where all the 'above the line' operational costs are covered by the income that the parks generate. 'Transforming the Country Parks' is a £12.5m HCC investment strategy to revitalise all six of HCC's country parks, including Staunton. It will be an intensive programme which aims to deliver major improvements within five years. Many improvements, whilst taking account of the local distinctiveness and needs of each park, can best be managed as a project across all six of the parks.
- 2.8. In light of the forthcoming end of the Agreement in the context of these financial pressures and changes, the time would seem to be right to step back and assess whether there is a more effective and efficient means for members of the partnership to influence, guide and, where necessary, challenge the management of the Park beyond 2015.
- 2.9. This report seeks to pose the question whether there is a more cost-efficient and streamlined way for decisions to be made, which empowers the Park's management team but which does not compromise the ability of members to safeguard the best interests of the Park and its customers.

### **3. Finance**

- 3.1. Supporting a JMC comes at a cost over and above that of an Advisory Body. With an Advisory Body model there would be no support required from either HCC Democratic Services or Finance and the input from the Countryside Department would be reduced.
- 3.2. Costs which would cease immediately include internal and external audit and officers travel costs. These are estimated at £3,000
- 3.3. In addition, there is the staff time spent supporting the JMC over and above that of an advisory body. This cost is estimated to be £26,000 - a figure based upon an annual total of 88 days of time from the six officers who most frequently attend or support the Committee.

### **4. Performance**

- 4.1. As part of this 'Transforming the Country Parks' work, the County Council's ambition is to lift the parks to a new level in terms of the quality of the facilities offered to the public and to ensure that they remain popular attractions for the local community which they serve. The over-riding objective for Staunton is to safeguard its future and ensure that it continues to offer opportunities for the local community to experience the countryside and heritage on their doorstep - as well as enjoy and understand about the management of farm animals.
- 4.2. The pressure on public sector funding is set to continue for some years to come, and therefore it is imperative to act now whilst there is a desire to invest in the parks, to ensure that Staunton is not vulnerable to any sudden change in funding priorities of the partners.
- 4.3. 'Transforming the Country Parks' is therefore a "once in a generation opportunity" to create a park which can meet the needs of not just the current community, but offers the facilities for enjoyment and education well into the future. The current Joint Management Agreement for Staunton recognises the functions of the Park as including "the provision of open air educational and other community activities principally to meet the needs of south-east Hampshire". These will remain central to the objectives in the coming years and will help to direct how this new investment is allocated.
- 4.4. It is important for Staunton staff to participate in, and benefit from, the work progressing across all of HCC's country parks. The common themes such as catering, staff development, play, 'visitor journey' and education and others will all now move forward. Staunton needs to benefit from these initiatives as much as the other parks. In addition, the Countryside Service is developing the marketing and promotion of all its parks. This includes the need to understand the customer needs for each park and, for example, to make best use of social media. None of this work should be undertaken in isolation for each park – the benefits must be across the board. A more flexible relationship between all the parks will also be of benefit to them all – whether this is sharing of staff, expertise and equipment or supporting each other for major events - it must be in the interest of each park to be part of a bigger family.

## 5. Future Direction - Proposal

- 5.1. The renewal date for the current Agreement presents an opportunity for the partners to consider how they can best contribute to the future development of the Park whilst ensuring that its core values are protected. Working through a formally constituted Joint Management Committee may no longer be the best way to achieve this. The scrutiny and advice currently provided will always be important and must be an essential part of any alternative model for the future management. However, rather than a formally constituted Joint Management Committee, a less costly, but no less effective, option may be an Advisory Panel comprising members of the partnership authorities. Current members of the partnership must retain the ability to help direct the overall vision for the Park and develop its short and long-term objectives but not necessarily need the detail relating to operational management decisions. To help inform its advice, the Panel could be supported by an effective stakeholder group (or a series of these) to ensure that user needs and wishes are heard and taken into account.
- 5.2. An Advisory Panel ought not to need the level of support currently provided by HCC Democratic Services to the JMC. It will, however, need to have a clear timetable and lead-in time for agenda items and for the advice provided to be properly recorded and responded to. In addition, to ensure that members of the Panel have the confidence to know that advice is taken into account, a formal reporting mechanism could include a regular report to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside. The Executive Member is responsible for setting the overall strategy and policy for the Communities and Cultural and Heritage groups of services. Working in this way, management decisions can be made at the time they are needed and can be made in way which fits with the work progressing across all the parks. Staff, budgets and equipment can be used in a more flexible way across the parks and deployed when most needed by each one. As described at paragraph 3, costs and time can be saved by the reduced need to provide detailed reports and by officers not travelling to as many meetings.
- 5.3. It is important for the decision making and management relating to the Park to be clear and straightforward. The allocation of funding and the strategic direction for all HCC Countryside Service work, including the parks, is within the remit of the Executive Member, supported by the Select Committee which underpins this process and scrutinises decisions. Management direction and support is provided through the senior management of the Countryside Service. Therefore, it could be viewed that what the Park needs, and would benefit from, is informed advice and guidance with an understanding of local community needs, rather than a further management or decision making body.
- 5.4. The alternative is that Staunton continues to be managed differently from the other parks. Financial management and reporting lines would remain discreet from all the other parks, making strategic decisions more difficult. Direct cuts to partner contributions are more likely if the costs of running the park are not off-set by the benefits of the parks working as a group.

5.5. It is, however, very important that the existing, successful partnership is not destabilised and that members feel confident that they can continue to play a part in protecting the special qualities of Staunton but also enabling it to adapt to people's needs and to become financially secure. On balance, an Advisory Panel with an annual, formal reporting mechanism to the Executive Member is proposed as the most effective means of ensuring that partners can ensure the best for the Park.

## **6. Recommendation**

- 6.1. That the Committee make the following recommendations to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside:
- 6.2. That the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside considers replacing the existing Joint Management Committee arrangements for Sir George Staunton Country Park with an Advisory Panel comprising the existing members of the Partnership. It is proposed that this Panel is supported by stakeholder groups representing the interests of the main users of the Park and that accountability is ensured through an annual report to the Executive Member.

**CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:****Links to the Corporate Strategy**

<b>Hampshire safer and more secure for all:</b>	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
<b>Maximising well-being:</b>	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
<b>Enhancing our quality of place:</b>	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

**Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents**

**The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)**

DocumentLocation

None

**IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:**

**1. Equalities Impact Assessment:**

1.1. N/A

**2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:**

2.1. N/A

**3. Climate Change:**

How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption? N/A

How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts? N/A