

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Decision Report

Decision Maker:	Executive Member Culture Recreation and Countryside
Date:	16 September 2014
Title:	Future Arrangements for the Joint Management Committee – Sir George Staunton Country Park
Reference:	6069
Report From:	Karen Murray, Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

Contact name: Andy Smith, Head of Countryside

Tel: 01962 846003 **Email:** andrew.t.smith@hants.gov.uk

1. Executive Summary

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to ask the Executive Member to decide upon the future governance arrangements for Staunton Country Park once the current Management Agreement ends on 31 March 2015.

1.2 This paper seeks to:

- i) Describe the current arrangements and how they were established.
- ii) Explain how the Agreement has enabled partners to contribute towards the development of the Park.
- iii) Cover the current performance of the Park and how this supports the objectives of the County Council.
- iv) Consider the financial implications of retaining the current arrangements and how these compare with alternative options.
- v) Briefly describe the future plans for the Park.

1.3 Finally, the report will recommend that the current management arrangements are retained following a review of the detailed terms, in order to advise upon the management of the Park and plans for its future development.

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

- 2.2 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 partners has increased and will 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 Park 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.
- 2.3 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% (£152,000) 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.
- 2.4 In addition, HCC’s contribution also 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.
- 2.5 Hampshire County Council, through the Countryside Service, is committed to ensuring that all of its country 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 and help them move quickly to this self-financing position. 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, will be managed as a project across all six of the parks.
- 2.6 In light of the forthcoming end of the Agreement in the context of the financial pressures and proposed investment programme, the time would seem to be right to step back and assess whether there is a more effective and efficient means for Staunton’s partners to influence, guide and, where necessary, challenge the management of the Park beyond 2015.

3. Finance

- 3.1. The annual cost of supporting the Joint Management Committee is approximately £26,000. This figure is based upon a current total commitment of 88 days of officer time and the associated travel costs. The figure is currently particularly high in light of the major changes at the Park and discussions about future developments. There is scope within a new agreement to address these costs by reducing the number of meetings and the amount of officer time required, particularly at a senior level.

4. Performance

- 4.1. Staunton Country Park is performing strongly. During 2013/14, recorded visitor numbers (though the payzone area of the Park) rose to 132,384, (the number of people who are now members of the Park is 6,727). Income from visitors increased to £851,130.
- 4.2. The Park also benefits from a huge amount of support from volunteers. Last year, volunteers contributed 8,675 days of their time.
- 4.3. Providing a service to local schools is major part of the Park's role. During 2013/14, 11,069 pupils visited the park as part of organised educational visits.
- 4.4. The Park has also retained its Green Flag Award this year. This is an important national award which recognises good management and the high quality of the services and facilities provided.
- 4.5. As part of its '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.
- 4.6. 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. Therefore, over the next few years, as the Transformation Programme develops, it is important that members of the Committee, as representatives of the partner organisations, have the ability to influence the park's development plan and to ensure that the interests of the Park and the community it serves are protected.

5. Options

- 5.1. When the Management Agreement ends in March 2015 there are a number of options for Park's future governance, including the following: -

- i) Continue with the existing Joint Management Committee arrangements serviced by the County Council's Democratic Services team.
- ii) Replace the Committee with a less formal advisory body.

An advisory body model would require no support from the County Council's Democratic Services and a reduced input from Finance colleagues and the Countryside Service team. Administrative support for meetings could be provided by the local team at the Park. There would be no requirement for internal or external audit if the decision was to move away from a formally constituted partnership. Accountability could be provided through regular reporting to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside.
- iii) Not to continue with the JMC or to replace it, but to manage the park wholly through the existing Countryside Service management structures alongside the other HCC country parks - with regular dialogue with the partner organisations.

6. Consultation

- 6.1. At recent meetings of the Joint Management Committee members considered the future governance arrangements and whether the ending of the current Agreement presented the opportunity to make a change. Members have discussed the alternative of changing to become a more informal advisory body and how effective this would be as a means of influencing the management and development of the Park. Members understood that 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 are heard and taken into account. Accountability could be provided through a formal reporting mechanism such as a regular report to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside.
- 6.2. A report on this subject was presented by the Head of Countryside to the meeting of the Joint Management Committee 23 June 2014. The report recommended that the JMC be replaced with a more informal advisory at end of the current Management Agreement. Members recognised the need for the decision making and management relating to the Park to be clear and straightforward. Members understood that issues relating to the strategic direction, the allocation of funding and operational management for all HCC Countryside Service work, including all of the country parks, is within the remit of the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside. However, members were also anxious to ensure that local knowledge, experience and expertise was harnessed. On balance, members agreed that the existing JMC arrangements work and have served the Park and the local community well for many years. Members recognised that the reporting structure and committee meetings do have time and cost implications but that this structure provides the clarity and clear accountability which may otherwise be lost. Members raised concerns

around the formation of an Advisory Body and subsequent Member inclusion in decision making for the Park. The Committee felt that Staunton Country Park differed from others and therefore its requirements were unique.

- 6.3. The recommendations in the report were considered and following a vote were rejected.

7. Future direction

- 7.1. It was resolved by the Joint Management Committee that the Committee should be retained. Members also resolved that a further report should be brought to the Committee to help refine the role and remit of the Committee.
- 7.2. It was agreed that a report should be presented to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside with a recommendation that the Joint Management Committee should be retained.

8. Recommendations

That the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation & Countryside approves the following recommendations:

- 8.1. That the Joint Management Committee for Sir George Staunton Country Park be retained following end of the existing Management Agreement in March 2015.
- 8.2. That current partners to the existing Management Agreement work to agree the terms of a new Agreement to commence from 1 April 2015.

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

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	no
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

Other Significant Links

Links to previous Member decisions:		
<u>Title</u>	<u>Reference</u>	<u>Date</u>
Sir George Staunton Country Park - Joint Management Arrangements Beyond 2015 http://www3.hants.gov.uk/councilmeetings/advsearchmeetings/meetingsitemdocuments.htm?sta=&pref=Y&item_ID=5930&tab=2&co=&confidential=	5390	23 June 2014
Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives		
<u>Title</u>	<u>Date</u>	

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.)

<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
None	

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equality Duty

- 1.1. The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;

Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;

Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;

Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;

Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

1.2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

- 1.3. The proposal to retain the Joint Management Committee for Sir George Staunton Country Park has been considered against the impact it would have on groups with protected characteristics. The proposal is relates to the governance of the Park. The governance arrangements in themselves will not have an impact but it is possible that advice given or decisions made will. In these instances an Equalities Impact Assessment will be required.

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