

Report to Environment & Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda
Item:
A.6

Meeting Date: Tuesday 21st October 2014
Portfolio: Environment and Transport
Key Decision: Not Applicable:
Within Policy and
Budget Framework YES
Public / Private Public

Title: TALKIN TARN COUNTRY PARK
Report of: The Director of Local Environment
Report Number: LE22/14A

Purpose / Summary:

The Business Plan aims to increase the revenue generated at Talkin Tarn by exploring the opportunities for new activities and by improving the presentation of the catering offer at the Tarn. New and improved facilities will attract new visitors and encourage them to stay longer. At the same time the natural beauty and wildlife value of Talkin Tarn will be protected.

Recommendations:

The panel is invited to give consideration and comment on the Business Plan as a blueprint for managing Talkin Tarn County Park within Local Environment for the coming 4 years.

Tracking

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Executive: | 13/10/14 & 10/11/14 |
| Overview and Scrutiny: | 21/10/14 |
| Council: | |

Report to Executive

Agenda
Item:

Meeting Date: 13th October 2014
 Portfolio: Environment and Transport
 Key Decision: Yes: Recorded in the Notice Ref:KD
 Within Policy and Budget Framework NO
 Public / Private Public

Title: TALKIN TARN BUSINESS PLAN
 Report of: The Director of Local Environment
 Report Number: LE19/14A

Purpose / Summary: This report introduces the draft business plan prepared for Talkin Tarn Country Park at the request of the Economy and Environment Portfolio Holder. The Business Plan aims to increase the revenue generated at Talkin Tarn by exploring the opportunities for new activities and by improving the presentation of the catering offer at the Tarn. New and improved facilities will attract new visitors and encourage them to stay longer. At the same time the natural beauty and wildlife value of Talkin Tarn will be protected.

Recommendations: The Executive refer the draft Talkin Tarn Business Plan to the next meeting of the Economy & Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel for its consideration and comments.

Tracking

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Executive: | |
| Overview and Scrutiny: | |
| Council: | |

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** Talkin Tarn Country Park was acquired by Carlisle City Council in 2006 after being declared 'surplus to requirements' by Cumbria County Council. Since the transfer the City Council has invested over £1m in the park, replacing dilapidated buildings and infrastructure. The new toilet block, education cabin and workshop/office buildings all incorporate a number of energy-saving technologies, including an air-source heat exchanger, photo-voltaic solar panels, rainwater recycling and sun-tubes to provide natural light.
- 1.2** For the first 5 years following the transfer the County Council provided at 'dowry' of £40,000 per annum, which helped to offset annual revenue costs. With the period of funding having expired, the Tarn is now in the position of needing to generate sufficient annual income to cover the operating costs.
- 1.3** Visitor numbers have not been directly counted, but previous traffic counts and current sales of car-parking tickets would indicate about 120,000 – 150,000 per annum arriving by car, with an unknown number arriving by alternative means including on foot and by bicycle. While the majority of visitors originate from Carlisle post-code area there is a tradition of day-visitors coming from the Tyne Valley which seems to be continuing.
- 1.4** Looking forward, it will be increasingly important to explore all opportunities for generating income at Talkin Tarn in ways that are appropriate to its landscape setting and wildlife resources. The Tarn is a cherished local beauty spot and needs to be treated with necessary respect. The Draft Business Plan appended to this report and report number LE19/14B sets out some options for ways in which this balanced approach can be achieved.

2. PROPOSALS

- 2.1** The Draft Business Plan is appended to this report, but in summary the suggestions for generating additional income fall into the following categories:
- Attracting new visitors
 - Encouraging repeat visits
 - New income streams
 - Improving the visitor/spend ratio

3. CONSULTATION

- 3.1** The main effort of consultation has been directed towards customers, with a survey underway through out the summer of 2014 to discover their profile and preferences. Some early indications are available but the survey is ongoing, conducted via:

- 'Focus' magazine
- City Council website
- Face-to-face

Discussions with site staff and users have been held and included members of Economy & Environment O&S (who were part of a 'task & finish' group). The Panel received an update report and presentation from the Green Spaces Manager at its meeting on 14 August.

4. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1** The Executive refers the draft Talkin Tarn Business Plan to the next meeting of the Economy & Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel for its consideration and comments.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

- 5.1** Aim 2: Talkin Tarn is a cultural facility that showcases the City of Carlisle to the many thousands of visitors who go there every year, including a large proportion who are from outside the district.

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Appendices

LE 19/14B

attached to report:

**Appendix 1. Talkin Tarn Country Park Business Plan 2014-2017
(Draft)**

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:

- None

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS/RISKS:

Chief Executive's –

Deputy Chief Executive –

Economic Development –

Governance – The Council has a duty to properly and efficiently manage the assets it holds on behalf of the public. A properly formulated business plan is a method of delivering upon such a responsibility. In addition, as occupier of the land, the Council has a statutory responsibility to ensure that all of those persons coming onto the land, whether by invitation or trespass, are reasonably safe. In addition, in providing services, we must ensure that as far as reasonably practicable, the facilities are available to all people in compliance with equality legislation

Local Environment –

Resources - There is a recurring budget provision of £55,900 allocated within the Council's revenue budget in 2014/15 onwards to fund the operational costs of running Talkin Tarn. The attached business plan sets out various proposals for initiatives within the country park with the aim of becoming self financing by 2020; however an element of capital investment may be required which will be subject to further reports and business cases as necessary.

Talkin Tarn Country Park

Business Plan 2014-2018

A great day out in the country!

(draft)

Talkin Tarn Business Plan (Draft)

Business Overview

Talkin Tarn Country Park is an established visitor attraction in north Cumbria, consisting of a small, glacial lake that has traditionally been used for watersports and recreation. It is surrounded by mixed woodland and pasture with accessible walking trails and wildlife observation opportunities.

There is a traditional tearoom contained within a Victorian boat-house beside the lake, with a take-away kiosk at ground level for sale of ice-creams, hot and cold drinks and snacks. A modest range of gift items and souvenirs are also offered for sale from the ground floor sales area.

We aim to provide a choice of refreshments to eat-in or take away, including items baked on the premises from fresh ingredients and using locally sourced products wherever possible including Lake District ice-cream. By focussing on local ingredients and home-made menu items across both catering outlets we aim to create a unique customer experience both for eat-in diners and those who prefer refreshments 'on the go' to be enjoyed whilst they explore the natural beauty of the Country Park.

The Tarn's unique selling point is the stunning landscape setting and wildlife habitats in which it sits. Any decisions relating to commercial activities will be taken in the light of the need to protect and conserve the natural features of the Tarn, including the water, woodland, and wildlife.

Other commercial activities include:

- watersports (boat and kayak hire and instruction; rowing and sailing clubs)
- craft fairs
- hire of meeting room
- car-park ticket sales

Financial Overview

The Country Park was acquired by Carlisle City Council in 2006 and for the first 5 years it received a £40,000 annual dowry from Cumbria County Council. This contribution ceased in 2011.

The primary objective of the initial Business Plan was to make the Country Park financially self-sufficient. With the financial realities having shifted considerably over the period, our revised business aim is to optimise the income (catering & sales, activities, paid events,

car park income) over the period of this plan, so that the Tarn is self-funding in entirety and could help to support green spaces in general by 2020.

Talkin Tarn Country Park – Business Plan, 2014-2018

1. Vision: Safety Natural Beauty Fun Activities Quality

Talkin Tarn Country Park is one of the premier venues in north Cumbria for informal countryside leisure and watersports activity, with a safe and welcoming environment for visitors, first-class facilities and enticing refreshment offer.

- 2. Aim:** Talkin Tarn Country Park is a must-go destination for anyone living in or visiting Carlisle and north Cumbria, where the natural beauty and environmental capital is enhanced by a range of fun-to-do activities and adventures, all in the safe and special surroundings of the Country Park.
- 3. Unique selling proposition:** Talkin Tarn is fully accessible to visitors for informal recreation, wildlife watching and watersports.
- 4. Keys to success:** The following factors are the main reasons that this business plan will succeed in achieving its aims both in terms of commercial viability and in providing an outstanding service to customers:
 - **Excellent customer service**
The needs of our customers will drive the business objectives and ensure a first-class all round experience that will make them want to come back again and again
 - **Exciting recreational opportunities including land and water based**
Visitors will be able to hire a boat or inflatable to take on to the water for a safe and enjoyable experience and will be able to use, free of charge, our children's adventure trail in the Tarn woodlands
 - **Committed and experienced staff**
People who care about the future of the Tarn and who see their job as a personal commitment to its success
 - **Good quality products – home-made and locally sourced ingredients**
Using the best Cumbrian suppliers and ingredients and supporting local businesses
 - **Seasonally variable food and drink offer**
The tearoom offers a varied menu including home-made food with seasonal specialities
 - **High standards of care for the outdoor environment**
Talkin Tarn is a special place for wildlife and our management of the County Park will provide space for our rare species to thrive and be enjoyed by our visitors.

5. Products and Services:

Adventures in the country!

There is tremendous scope for adventurous watersports on the Tarn including kayaking, water zorbing, wild swimming, katakayak, sailboarding, and winch kitesurfing. All these activities should be available for casual visitors to take part in. Competitive rowing and sailing will continue to be offered by the amateur sports clubs based at the Tarn.

On land there is the potential for a different range of activities. Orienteering is already available, but adventure trails in the plantation woodland (of lower ecological value) would attract younger visitors and families who are currently under-represented in the visitor profiling. Grass skateboarding, zorbing, tree-climbing and other fun activities could be added to the mix of activities offered.

Water Fun for the Family

Gentler activities suitable for the whole family will be part of the mix – traditional rowing boats for hire, pedaloes and Indian canoes.

‘Home made’ hot and cold food.

The Boat House tearoom offers a range of hot and cold meals using locally sourced ingredients where possible.

Ambience

The tearoom is located in a Victorian building of charm and character and includes a real wood fire for crisp, winter days as well as a balcony overlooking the Tarn for outdoor eating during the lazy days of summer.

Quick snacks & refreshments

The Boat House kiosk offers an alternative type of refreshment, including hot and cold drinks ‘to go’, sandwiches, savoury snacks, confectionery and Lake District ice-cream.

Gifts & souvenirs

The Boat House also offers a range of gifts and souvenirs including craft products, as well as a small exhibition area showcasing local artists and photographers.

Arts & crafts

The Alex boat house is used as a space for exhibition and sales of art and crafts. (It has electricity supplied but no gas or plumbing so the uses of the building are limited). The building is in a prime location and should be promoted and rented out as a space for sales of quality goods compatible with the location.

Opening Hours (Provisional)

Opening hours for the tea-room and kiosk are seasonally variable – 10.00 – 18.00 every day in summer, later if an event is taking place. In winter the tearoom opens only at weekends, while the kiosk opens 10.30 – 18.00 daily for take-away snacks and drinks. The park itself is open 24/7 for informal recreation.

A Table 5.1 showing analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is shown in Report LE 19 14B at Appendix 2

Key Staff

The catering team leader is assisted by a part-time cook/kitchen team leader and a group of casual staff. This gives the team flexibility while keeping costs down and allows them to respond to variations in visitor numbers (on quiet days the casual staff hours are reduced; on busy days extra staff can be called in at short notice).

A flexible staff team also allow the operator to respond to short-term fluctuations in demand, for example it makes sense for us to be able to offer a catering service during fine evenings in summer when the Country Park may have reasonable numbers of visitors on-site.

6. Key marketing advantages:

- Easy access and car-parking
- Safe visitor experience with level paths and staff on-site
- On-site refreshments including tearoom and separate kiosk selling home-made food and drink and locally produced ice-cream (no competitor on-site)
- Stunning landscape setting on the edge of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)
- Daily changing panorama of lake, woodland and surrounding fells
- Unique wildlife including red squirrels, otters and rare wildflowers
- Visitors have access to watersports and hire of various watercraft
- Rolling programme of art & craft exhibitions in the Alex Boathouse

7. Disadvantages: The weather is the greatest determinant of success for any outdoor attraction, especially one where the outdoor environment itself is the main draw. Poor weather in the summer has a dramatic impact on revenue. While the site itself is unique in North Cumbria, the tea room has competitors at Brampton in the form of a number of cafes, the tea room at Lanercost Priory and cafes at a number of local garden centres.

8. Market: Talkin Tarn lies 10 miles east of the city of Carlisle, close to the market town of Brampton. Approximately 150,000 people live within 30 minutes drive of Talkin Tarn and about 1.5 million (including the Tyne/Wear conurbations) within an hour's drive. Car park data suggests around 40,000 cars per annum visit the car-

park and this translates to about 120,000 visitors. Together with those who arrive by other transport the total number of visitors may be around 150,000 per annum.

- 9. Market analysis:** The typical visitor to Talkin Tarn Country Park is attracted by the outdoor environment – a 1.5 mile walk around the lakeshore is seen as a manageable and enjoyable source of fresh air and exercise. A substantial proportion of visitors are from Carlisle district but a significant group come from the Tyne valley. Having enjoyed the outdoors, many visitors appreciate the chance to enjoy some refreshments, hot or cold according to the season, without having to leave the site. The typical visitor stays between 1 and 2 hours and travels to the site by car.
- 10. Market segmentation:** Talkin Tarn is popular with dog-walkers from the local area as well as car-borne day visitors from Carlisle and surrounding area. There is also a considerable segment of day visitors from the Tyne Valley, who would have traditionally arrived by train to Brampton but now come by car. Most visitors fall into the 'young family' (25-40yrs with children under 10) or 40-70yrs, active middle aged brackets. 16-25yrs young singles are under-represented.
- 11. Visitor responses.** Previous visitor surveys have focussed on the reasons given for visiting Talkin Tarn and the point of departure for the visit. Most visitors quoted a variation on the opportunity for safe, informal recreation in an attractive outdoor environment as the main reason for their visit, while the majority of visitors live within a 10 mile radius of the country park. There is a significant minority of visitors coming from the Tyne Valley, a tradition that continues to the present day.

Regular visitor surveys are carried out to gain more up-to-date information as to visitor preferences, demographics and socio-economic factors.

Informal visitor feedback is available through social media on the internet. While this is not strictly representative and tends to emphasise the extremes of visitors' opinions, it is useful in highlighting current issues.

For example, a quick scan of current reviews on the TripAdvisor site - 'Talkin Tarn Park' – reveals that the majority of visitors are very enthusiastic about the environmental quality of the site, with the issue of dog mess generating the only negative comments. The existing catering offer also receives some very positive responses as well as some complaints.

The net effect of all this feedback is to help us to improve the service on offer throughout the park. We can influence the behaviour of dog owners to reduce the

problem of dog fouling and we can look at the operation of the catering outlets to make sure we are in-line with competitors on price and service.

- 12. Pricing:** Pricing is a key component of the marketing mix at the tea room. It needs to reflect the factors listed above (location, markets segments, quality) but also the additional costs of operating the business in a remote location and with extensive weekend opening hours (resulting in higher wage costs).

13. Financial information – results and projections

13.1 Financial targets: Talkin Tarn Country Park currently has a gross turnover of about £270,000 of which about £118,000 goes towards site management and the balance on the Boat House Tearoom. The tearoom is currently budgeted to make a net income of £11,000.

The Council's stated aim is for the Country Park to operate at a zero net cost – in other words, income generated at the Tarn should cover all running costs and overheads.

13.2 Income and Expenditure Account, 2013-14

| Income & Expenditure Account 2013/14 | | |
|--|---------|---------|
| Income | £ | £ |
| Car Park ticket sales | 38,000 | |
| Sales of refreshments and gifts | 132,000 | |
| Grazing rents | 2,000 | |
| Agri-environmental grants | 6,000 | |
| Boat-hire and watersports | 1,000 | |
| Rowing Club, Sailing Club licences | 2,000 | |
| Sundry income | 4,000 | |
| Cabin Hire | 5,000 | |
| Sale of Vehicles | 3,000 | |
| TOTAL INCOME | | 193,000 |
| Expenditure | | |
| Employee costs | 70,000 | |
| Premises, inc heat and light | 35,000 | |
| Transport | 1,000 | |
| Equipment & materials | 74,000 | |
| Contractors | 3,000 | |
| Central recharge contribution | 55,000 | |
| Depreciation | 5,000 | |
| TOTAL EXPENDITURE | | 243,000 |
| Contribution Required re Talkin Tarn | | 50,000 |
| Budgeted Contribution re Talkin Tarn | | 54,500 |
| Reduction in Contribution Required to Fund Talkin Tarn | | (4,500) |

Talkin Tarn exceeded income targets by £4,500 in 2013/14, which reduced the contribution from the City Council to £50,000.

14. Cash Flow – Boat House Tea-room and kiosk

The greatest single source of income at Talkin Tarn is the tea-room and kiosk. Additional marketing activity and promotion of the Tarn will bring in additional visitors who will make an indirect contribution to the by purchase of refreshments. The ratio of visitors to income at the tea-room would suggest that an additional 5,000 visitors per annum would add about £7,500 to the income.

15. Conclusions

Talkin Tarn Country Park is an asset for the people of Carlisle and is much cherished by those who go there regularly. It attracts visitors from outside the district and the improvements undertaken since 2006 have made a great difference to the quality of visitors' experience.

The business opportunities at the Tarn are divided into the catering and recreational sectors and are delivered by a combination of franchise (recreation) and direct provision (catering). There are opportunities to develop these segments that should be pursued by the Council in order to optimise the income-generating capacity of the site. At the same time the quality of the natural environment, which is the Tarn's unique attraction, should not be compromised.

The operation of the catering outlets generates significant revenue which could be increased by some careful marketing and promotion. The revenues help to cover the running costs of the sites and also make a contribution of £60,000 to the Council's general fund, which would have to be the minimum value of the contract if this part of the operation were to be franchised at any point in the future.

The catering operation is run with a tight control on costs but there is still the potential to increase income further. Opportunities to develop the income rely on increasing visitor numbers by introducing new attractions and conducting a targeted marketing campaign, based on the information derived from the customer surveys conducted during 2014.

The costs of managing the outdoor environment are partly offset by income from car-parking, grazing rents and agri-environment grants but the catering operation will always be the single most important source of income generation.

Further attention to cost-control and initiatives to draw in new customers will be adopted in order to achieve the position, by 2017, where all costs (including the contribution to the Council's central recharges) are covered by income generated at the Country Park.

Annex 1 – Extracted from TripAdvisor UK - Talkin Tarn Park

hillwalker555
Penrith, United Kingdom
Senior Contributor
23 reviews

[“Lovely setting.”](#)

Reviewed 9 June 2014

I remember coming here as a boy (a thousand years ago) before it was developed into an attraction. It was then a simple Cumbrian tarn used mainly by occasional swimmers and a small boating club. We once got up to a little mischief with the property of the said boating club and were physically chastised by the huge local constable... [More](#)

Anna P
Shepshed, United Kingdom
2 reviews

[“Following the Trails”](#)

Reviewed 7 June 2014

Good Place to walk with suitable accessible paths, a little too busy for us and our dogs. Lots to do for families and on the water for water sports.

mazz63
Newcastle
Senior Reviewer

[“Lovely location.”](#)

Reviewed 1 June 2014

We enjoyed a lovely day at Talkin Tarn Country Park. Lovely location for a nice walk with the dog. Excellent views around the water, we were lucky to see the two Swans and their 4 Cygnets simply superb. Enjoyed a nice ice cream in the sunshine after our walk. Plenty of parking and this location is Motorhome friendly.

hilary1447
Carlisle, United Kingdom
Reviewer

[“A real treasure”](#)

Reviewed 29 May 2014

It is so peaceful and yet there's lots of things to do. Woods to walk through, orchids and other wild flowers to see. Great for birding and also for sailing on the tarn. Boats for hire in the season. Most dog walkers are very good about picking up after their dogs and the cafe is well worth a visit. No... [More](#)

jonathan t
Senior Reviewer

[“Great but way to much dog mess”](#)

Reviewed 29 May 2014

Great walk even in bad weather but warning dog Mess everywhere dogs should have separate path as it. Is health hazard What out for traffic warden there awful

cracker40
england
Senior Contributor

[“walk”](#)

Reviewed 28 May 2014

enjoyed the walk and the pasties are to die for [yummy I wish the dog walkers would pick up the dog muck discussing for the walkers and children they could do with dog warden to fine them on the spot.

Mark H
Senior Reviewer

[“Lazy stroll”](#)

Reviewed 26 May 2014

If your stuck how to spend an hour or two you co do worse than to pay this a visit .A leisurely stroll round the tarn with wildlife close to hand fits the bill.tearoom ice cream and toilets on site covers all bases though one word to the wise the parking has recently changed from £1 for the day to... [More](#)

Leona91
Chester-le-Street, United Kingdom
Reviewer

[“awesome day every year”](#)

Reviewed 5 May 2014

talking tarn regatta every year is amazing the facilities are clean and looked after for a park. brilliant ice cream shop and café. awesome.