

Report to Environment & Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda Item:
A.5

Meeting Date: Thursday 15th September 2016
Portfolio: Environment and Transport
Key Decision: Not Applicable:
Within Policy and Budget Framework No
Public / Private Public

Title: BUSINESS PLAN DEVELOPMENT FOR CARLISLE PARKS
Report of: The Deputy Chief Executive
Report Number: LE 17/16

Purpose / Summary: This report provides an update on the progress of the business plan for Talkin Tarn which was steered by Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Panel in 2014. Notable success has been achieved in growing the revenues generated at Talkin Tarn although there is still potential for further improvement. The report highlights areas of achievement and opportunities for further development.

Recommendations:

1. Members are invited to a) consider the contents of this report and appendix; and b) to provide guidance for officers in replicating the successful initiatives in other parks and green spaces.

Tracking

Executive:	N/A
Overview and Scrutiny:	
Council:	N/A

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** The Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Panel received the first Business Plan for Talkin Tarn in July 2014 including proposals for diversifying and increasing the income generating potential of the Country Park. Car park fees and sales at the Boat House Tearoom have increased significantly in the past 3 years and this may have been helped by better marketing and popular events. Consecutive years of warm, dry spring weather have also helped to bring in early-season visitors especially in the school holidays.
- 1.2** The May half-term in 2016 saw our record weekly takings in 10 years of trading. Other initiatives have yet to come to fruition; after a promising start our recreation provider was given notice to quit the contract after he failed to deliver on a number of fronts. A temporary contract has been let with a local provider for the remainder of this season and a new tender will be issued over the winter to start at Easter 2017. One area where we were let down is in the provision of camping and this will be included in the new invitation to tender.
- 1.3** Finally we are pleased to have results from the market research exercise undertaken last year by colleagues in Policy & Performance, which has assisted us to target our promotion towards the most receptive audiences.

2. PROPOSALS

- 2.1** The proposals for taking forward the commercial opportunities presented by parks and green spaces are contained in the Appendix to this report, together with some analysis of the successful implementation of the Business Plan for Talkin Tarn Country Park.

3. CONSULTATION

- 3.1** Consultation on the proposals has taken a number of forms:
- Public consultation events e.g. Melbourne Park
 - Attendance at meetings e.g. Carlisle Youth League AGM (football)
 - Regular consultation with 'Friends' groups
 - Internal consultation and partnership working e.g. Events working group

4. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1** The sensitive development of our parks and green spaces is a corporate objective in response to the need to manage our assets sustainably. Income that is generated by our own activities can be used directly to benefit the users of the facility as at Talkin Tarn, where income from parking charges was used to tarmac the car-park and resurface the access road.
- 4.2** Projects that can benefit from earned income include provision of new equipment e.g. children's play areas; outdoor gym equipment; or better safety features. In some cases it may be spent on the green infrastructure, for example to create new habitats or to plant trees.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

5.1 Contributes to Priorities 2 and 3

Priority 2: Further develop sports, arts and cultural facilities to support the health and wellbeing of our residents.

Priority 3: Continue to improve the quality of our local environment and green spaces so that everyone can enjoy living, working in and visiting Carlisle.

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**Appendices
attached to report:**

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 –
Local Environment –
Resources -**

TALKIN TARN BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE – SEPTEMBER 2016

Summary

This report provides an update on the progress of the business plan for Talkin Tarn which was steered by Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Panel in 2014. Notable success has been achieved in growing the revenues generated at Talkin Tarn although there is still potential for further improvement. The report highlights areas of achievement and opportunities for further development.

Background

The popularity of Talkin Tarn as a destination for local people was underlined toward the end of 2015 when it was voted 'Best Place to Visit' in the Carlisle Living Awards. The trophy is proudly displayed at the Boathouse Tea Room as a reminder to staff and customers that they are part of a successful and growing visitor attraction. As if to underline this, we have again been nominated in the 2016 awards.

Car park fees and sales at the Boat House Tearoom have increased significantly in the past 3 years and this may have been helped by better marketing and popular events. Consecutive years of warm, dry spring weather have also helped to bring in early-season visitors especially in the school holidays.

Further changes to the layout and presentation of the 'point of sale' at the tearoom have made the procedure for ordering and paying for food quicker and simpler for the customer and easier for our staff – in other words improving productivity.

The May half-term in 2016 saw our record weekly takings in 10 years of trading and the August Bank Holiday set a new record for a single day.

Other initiatives have yet to come to fruition; after a promising start our recreation provider was given notice to quit the contract after he failed to deliver on a number of fronts. A temporary contract has been let with a local provider for the remainder of this season and a new tender will be issued over the winter to start at Easter 2017. One area where we were let down is in the provision of camping and this will be included in the new invitation to tender.

Finally we are pleased to have results from the market research exercise undertaken last year by colleagues in Policy & Performance, which has assisted us to target our promotion towards the most receptive audiences.

The table below shows the growth in income generated at Talkin Tarn over the past 3 financial years. This does not include the City Council's revenue contribution.

Table 1. Earned Income, 2013 – 2016 (last full financial year)

Income Source	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Boathouse Tearoom sales	132,224	156,362	180,787
Car park charges	40,124	44,334	51,395
Boat hire	361	568	241
Fishing	551	886	688
Rents etc	7,581	9,606	6,548
Events	361	497	2,401
Grants	7,200	15,000	4,990
Miscellaneous	4,739	2,598	2,499
TOTAL	193,141	229,852	249,549

These figures show an increase of over 29% in income generated at Talkin Tarn over the 3-year period – an encouraging result in the context of the further opportunities that still exist. It is especially pleasing to see a steady rise in sales of car park tickets which suggests that visitors are coming to the Tarn in greater numbers – either new visitors or existing customers returning more frequently. Either way it means we are offering a quality of service that people are prepared to pay for.

Opportunities

While the results to date have shown an encouraging trend of increasing revenues, there are still further areas for development where the potential still remains to be tapped. The key opportunities are described below:

1. Camp Site Development

The franchise for developing a sustainable campsite catering for pre-booked and touring guests was won, on the basis of a tender process, by Can You Experience? (CYE) – a company based in Scotland who have expanded their operations in recent years. Unfortunately the company pursued this element of the business with only limited enthusiasm – an entry on a website dedicated to campsites was launched without consultation and gave misleading information resulting in a number of unhappy campers! This was one of our reasons for terminating the contract with CYE. A small number of touring campers have been accommodated but the potential of the site remains to be properly explored and we will re-offer the franchise in autumn 2016 for a spring 2017 start-up.

The potential of the camp site could be enhanced further by some capital investment and we will look into the possibility of partnership working to achieve this.

For the moment the camp site remains a basic facility but there is a market for this type of site. An internet app exists for booking spaces on sites like this and Talkin Tarn will be ideally placed for bookings through this medium once we have a delivery partner in place.

2. Water Sports and Recreation

CYE were also appointed to deliver water sports and other recreational activities in 2015 with a 5 year agreement. After making a late start in 2015 and having a poor season in terms of revenues, CYE were given the option of terminating the contract before the 2016 season commenced. Having chosen to continue, CYE made a late start to the season once again and subsequently we cancelled their contract. A temporary arrangement has been put in place for summer of 2016 and the contract will be re-let to commence at Easter 2017.

In the 2015 season CYE did eventually demonstrate that there is a market for a range of recreational activities that can be charged for, providing the equipment is of reasonable quality and that it is properly marketed. Our intention with the new operator will be to make sure they have the capacity and experience to make this happen from the beginning of the season and throughout.

One of the market segments identified in the 2014 Business Plan that was not properly tapped by CYE is schools and group visits. This is potentially a significant market and will need some careful promotion if it is to succeed. Further ideas to develop this segment can be found later in this report.

3. New Attractions

Successful visitor attractions of any kind are constantly developing new facilities or services to attract customers and it makes good promotional sense to be able to advertise new reason for visiting.

For 2017 we aim to replace the children's play area at Talkin Tarn, which has had little investment for many years and yet is a well-used and popular feature of the Tarn. Using funds generated at the Tarn we will have a brand-new, state-of-the art play facility to promote as a new attraction for the next visitor season.

Together with new recreation facilities and campsite services, Talkin Tarn will have a number of new attractions to promote in 2017.

4. Fellfoot Forward

Fellfoot Forward is the name of a Landscape Partnership project in development by the North Pennines Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty and due to be submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund in September. Talkin Tarn Country Park is within the proposed project area and the 3-person project team will potentially be based at the Tarn in existing buildings.

With work programmes based on the conservation and interpretation of the area's landscape and cultural traditions, Fellfoot Forward will bring benefits to the area in terms of tourism, recreation, skills development and conservation. One of the specific proposals involves a travel grant to enable schools and community groups to visit Talkin Tarn for learning and recreational activities – helping to make more

use of our facilities and resources. The aim is to bring up to 4,500 additional group visitors to the Tarn in the lifetime of the Fellfoot Forward project.

We are hopeful of a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund and subsequent benefits to Talkin Tarn from 2017 onwards.

5. Marketing and promotion

We have improved our online presence with a refreshed website and this medium offers further opportunities. Partnership working with our campsite and recreation providers, plus opportunities offered by a successful Fellfoot Forward project will provide better presence and widen the audience for Talkin Tarn.

Trip Advisor, an online ratings site for visitor attractions, eating places and accommodation providers continues to provide excellent visitor feedback and the Tarn is currently 5th in the ranking of places to go in North Cumbria.

Other Parks

With Bitts Park currently out of action following the floods, Hammond's Pond has been the main focus for recreation during the summer of 2016. With our recreation partner CYE performing better here, the café has been operating throughout the season. Unfortunately problems with excessive weed growth in the pond forced us to cancel the boat hire operation early. In 2015 this was shown to be a loss-making service and it was felt by officers and the operator that the costs of clearing the weed would not be justified by the uptake of boat hire. A longer-term view of this particular service needs to be taken.

In addition to the café, Hammond's Pond contains a large and well-used play area, plus a multi-games area, BMX track and basketball frame. The annual Upperby Gala is hosted here, providing an opportunity for generating some income although on a limited scale.

There is some scope of development of visitor attractions and we will be carrying out an end of season review with CYE to see how their operation has performed and ascertain their intentions for next year.

Chances Park contains a large and well-used play area. Refreshments are provided by Morton Manor Community Centre so the City Council has no direct income. It may be possible to franchise a mobile catering operation but at the moment we have no hard information or indication of the likely level of demand for such a service.

Other parks such as Keenan Park, Melbourne Park and Heysham Park all contain children's play areas but none have a focal point for visitors such as a café or any indoor facilities.

Bitts Park

Bitts Park contains the largest and most diverse children's play facility in the City Council's ownership, together with recreational and sports facilities provided by 2 other external providers (Urban Adventure operate the high ropes course and GLL operate tennis, crazy golf, dry skating rink and the refreshment kiosk).

While the majority of these facilities have been out of action since the flood in December 2015, Urban Adventure was able to re-open in time for the 2016 season (the mechanical components were above the flood level).

The flood recovery process and the re-tendering of the City Council's leisure contract (currently with GLL) provides the opportunity to re-think the recreation offer at Bitts Park. There is no doubt that the children's play area is a major draw for families, especially in the summer holidays, but as it is a free-to-use facility the Council has no means of gaining a direct financial benefit. Urban Adventure has been a limited success to date but perhaps the lack of any alternative provision in summer 2016 will have helped to improve their turnover.

It would be possible to reorganise the recreational offer at Bitts Park in different ways. One option would be to include more in the leisure contract in terms of maintenance; another would be to bring the refreshment kiosk back in-house. The potential for revenue generation is considerable and this could be used to pay for the maintenance of the play area and other facilities.