

# Report to Environment & Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda Item:  
**A.3**

Meeting Date: Thursday 14 August 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: LE13/14

**Purpose / Summary:**

The purpose of the report is to provide the panel with an interim report on the development of a business plan for Talkin Tarn Country Park and includes the financial results for the year ended 31.03.2014; analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; and initial ideas for addressing opportunities (to be developed further in the business plan).

**Recommendations:**

The Panel considers the report and information and provides comments to inform the further development of the business plan.

**Tracking**

Executive:	
Overview and Scrutiny:	
Council:	

## **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1** Since 2006, Talkin Tarn Country Park, near Brampton, has been owned and managed by Carlisle City Council after being acquired from Cumbria County Council for a nominal sum. In its first year of ownership the City Council invested over £1m in upgrading the facilities at the Tarn including the Education cabin, public toilets, boat houses and workshop/office.
- 1.2** The country park has long been popular with visitors from the local area and the Tyne Valley who come for fresh air, woodland and waterside walks, water-based recreation and the opportunity to enjoy views of the North Pennine fells. A converted boat house functions as a tea-room and a take-away kiosk. Visitor numbers have never been accurately counted but based on car-park data the estimate is 120,000 annual visitors. There is a small body of regular visitors who come daily to walk their dog early and/or later in the day, travelling a short distance to do so.
- 1.3** In 2010 the Council introduced a charge for car-parking which met with some resistance but has now been largely accepted by visitors. The first hour's stay is £1.00, £2.00 after that. Charges do not apply before 10.00 or after 18.00. Increasing the car-park charges is an option for bringing in additional revenue.
- 1.4** Income from the tea-room for year ended 31 March 2014 was about £125,000 and the car park £38,000. Other sources (hire fees, grants and rents) brought the total earned income up to £193,000. With the net budget contribution included, the total income for the year was £248,500
- 1.5** Expenditure for the year, including maintenance of the park and running the tea-room totalled £183,000. A contribution to central recharges of £60,000 brought this figure up to £243,000.

### **1.6 Talkin Tarn Country Park Income and Expenditure Account, 2013-14**

#### **Expenditure**

Expenditure for the tea-room and park has been amalgamated for simplicity and includes employee costs, premises, inc heat and light, transport, equipment & materials etc. Total Expenditure £243,000

## Income

Income is generated at Talkin Tarn through a number of streams including car park ticket sales, sales of refreshments and gifts, boat hire and watersports, grazing rents, agri-environmental grants, Rowing Club, Sailing Club licences etc

Total Income £248,500

These results are very encouraging – the Country Park as a whole made a surplus of £5,500 on the year and made a £60,000 contribution to the City Council's central costs.

## 2. Developments in the past 12 months

2.1 Since the visit of the O&S Panel to Talkin Tarn in 2013 there have been a number of developments at the Country Park, both in the management of the outdoor environment and in the commercial operations at the tea-room:

- Outdoor seating and tables outside the take-away kiosk to encourage customers to stay in the vicinity to consume refreshments purchased
- Refurbishment of the upstairs balcony to provide improved eating experience with extensive views of the tarn and the North Pennine fells
- Redesign of interior seating area to provide an area of informal seating on sofas, next to the woodstove
- Signing up a 2-year agreement with Tarn Adventures to provide a range of water-sport activities including boat hire and kayak instruction.
- Creation of a wader-scape – a shallow pool for use by wading birds as a feeding area, within the natural wetland to the side of the tarn.
- Adoption of a Woodland Improvement Grant scheme (WIG) which has provided funds for an extensive tree-planting scheme

## SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Committed and experienced staff <i>People who care about the future of the Tarn and who see their job as a personal commitment to its success</i>	Local Authority procedures and decision-making that inhibit flexible response to market and customer demands
Good quality products – home-made and locally sourced ingredients <i>Using the best of Cumbrian suppliers and ingredients and supporting local businesses</i>	Lack of entrepreneurial experience
	Location which requires a specific decision to visit
Excellent customer service <i>All staff are trained in food hygiene and in</i>	Limited access by public transport

<i>providing excellent care for all our customers</i>	Relatively high overheads (central recharges)
Seasonally variable food and drink offer <i>The tea-room offers a varied menu including home-made food with seasonal specialities</i>	Commercial competition nearby
High standards of maintenance of the outdoor environment <i>Talkin Tarn is an all-round visitor experience and customers at the tea-room may also choose to enjoy a walk around the lake or through the extensive natural; woodlands</i>	Weather dependent
	Income deficiency from out-of-hours visitors
Exciting recreational opportunities including land and water based <i>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</i>	
Talkin Tarn is well-known in the region and is already popular with visitors <i>A history of day visitors from the Tyne Valley has continued, together with people from the wider Carlisle district.</i>	

<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>THREATS</b>
Among the opportunities for increasing the revenue generated at Talkin Tarn are:-	Local authority resources under pressure
Increase payable car-parking hours to start at 9.00am (currently 10.00am)	Perceived poor performance (income generation)
Introduce new attractions for young families to bring in new visitors, e.g. adventure play trails	Over-development
Development of wet-weather attractions and activities	Intense public scrutiny leads to inhibited decision making
Develop our relationship with the water-sports franchisee to maximise the	Shortage of site staff resource

recreational potential and income generation from water-based activities	
Close attention to business costs and operational practices – ensuring costs are controlled and the value of our investment in catering operations is maximised, e.g. flexible staff hours at quiet times; portion control.	Un-cooperative partners (rowing club)
Introduce high-end camping opportunities on a franchise basis	Blue-green algae inhibiting use of the water body
Joint marketing with nearby attractions	
Joint development and promotion of the site in partnership with North Pennines AONB	
Customer loyalty scheme offering free products as a reward for repeat purchases	
License the premises to host weddings and other celebrations	
Install suitable vending machines to provide out-of-hours refreshments service	
Organise more events and specific activities to bring in families (who will then become repeat business)	
Permanent lease on the Alex boathouse to generate guaranteed income from a private tenant	
Campaign of promotion and advertising including sponsorship opportunities	

### 3. ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Survey data already available to us reveals some useful information:

- Currently the average contribution per visitor to Talkin Tarn Country Park is approximately £1.00
- The total number of visitors is slowly increasing
- Visitors numbers are closely correlated with the weather
- Visitors are drawn from a wide catchment including a significant number from the Tyne Valley

**3.2** The SWOT analysis above gives us some pointers for further development and refinement in the forthcoming Business Plan.

#### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE BUSINESS PLAN**

**4.1** The over-riding objective to be addressed in the business plan is the optimising of the customer experience at Talkin Tarn Country Park, from arriving at the park entrance, parking their car, accessing the woodland and lakeside, taking part in some of the activities on offer and enjoying some refreshment at the catering outlets. Within this framework we would wish to make sure that the outstanding environment of Talkin Tarn is protected and conserved for future generations and that the commercial aspects of the park are in tune with the location.

**4.2** Notwithstanding the above, the strongest safeguard for the future of the Country Park will be evidenced by it performing as an asset to the City Council and this means it will have to be able to show a significant degree of financial self-reliance. The SWOT analysis suggests there may be some additional development work to do on the commercial aspects of the Tarn in order to achieve this outcome – the Business Plan will include more detail on the options available to the Council.

#### **5. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES**

**5.1** *‘Develop sports, arts & cultural facilities, showcasing the city of Carlisle’* – up to 150,000 visitors per annum, many from outside the district enjoying first class natural environments and excellent visitor facilities. Growing amateur rowing club based at Talkin Tarn bringing up to 1,000 people for the annual regatta.

*‘Ensuring a high quality environment which is attractive to new businesses and residents’* – managing a SSSI wetland and Cumbria Wildlife Site woodland including at least one Red Data Book species of rare wildflower (Sword-leaved helleborine). 2 new businesses in the process of becoming established at the Country Park - watersports and camping pods.

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**Appendices  
attached to report:**