

Cabinet

19th November 2019

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities - Councillor AS Khan

Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources – Councillor J Mutton

Directors Approving Submission of the report:

Deputy Chief Executive (Place)

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title: Coombe Abbey Park – Commercialisation and Sustainable Development of Children’s Play Facilities and car park remodelling

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

In October 2018 the City Council resolved to fund a tree top, high wire experience at Coombe Abbey Park (CAP) in partnership with Coombe Abbey Hotel and Go Ape. The CAP Go Ape facility has been operational since April 2019 and has exceeded expectations in both visitor numbers and financial performance, providing an enhancement to the visitor experience at CAP.

This report seeks to further improve the visitor experience at CAP by investing £800k. £650k in replacing and updating two existing play areas, one adjacent to the park’s visitors centre and the second in the wooded area near Top Pool Lodge, replacing the current outdated, free to use play area. It is intended that the play area near Top Pool Lodge will be a pay and play facility with a proposed charge of £2 per session. Proposed location of the pay and play facility is shown appendix 1

In addition it is proposed to use £150k in remodelling the existing car park to create an additional 300 parking spaces to handle the expected increase in numbers.

It is proposed that the total capital investment of £800k will be paid back over a period of twenty years for the play areas, and ten years for the car park. In addition, the business case projects a surplus of c.£100k from year three of operation that could contribute to the City Council’s medium-term financial strategy.

If approved by Cabinet, and subject to planning consent being obtained from Rugby Borough Council, it is proposed to have these new facilities operational by the summer of 2021.

An example of the type of play facility proposed for the charged area is given in appendix 2.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

- 1) Approve the removal of the existing play equipment and to replace it with a unique and modern adventure play experience.
- 2) Approve the commencement of a procurement process to appoint a contractor to design and build the Adventure Play Facility at a capital cost of up to £650k.
- 3) Approve works to reconfigure the car parking arrangements at the existing facility to create an additional 300 car parking spaces at a capital cost of up to £150k
- 4) Delegate authority to the Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities, following the completion of the procurement process to approve the award of the contract to the preferred bidder.
- 5) Approve expenditure of up to £800,000 to be funded from Corporate Capital Resources during 2019/2020 to complete the project as described in section 1 of this report.

List of Appendices included:

Appendix 1- Location plan detailing proposed location of play and play adventure facility

Appendix 2 – example of type of play equipment proposed

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coombe Abbey Park – Development of Children’s Play Facilities Capital Financing

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1. CAP is one of Coventry City Councils largest parks covering an area of approximately 500 hectares. Although lying just outside the City and within the administrative boundaries of Rugby Borough Council, the park land was purchased by Coventry City in 1964 to provide its growing and developing community with access to additional and unique green open space. Since that time the Council has continued to improve and develop the park in terms of both its historical and environmental importance but also the educational and recreational experiences offered.
- 1.2. The park has a wide range of semi-natural habitats with the majority of the site being covered by two designations: a site of special scientific interest; and a site of importance for Nature Conservation. It also has considerable historical significance, not least as a Capability Brown Landscape.
- 1.3. A number of key features and facilities are contained within the park which include woodland areas and walks, a significant lake and pond area, car parking facilities, picnic sites, children’s play facilities, event areas and formal gardens. There is also a large visitor centre containing a shop, staff offices and mess facilities, a sports bar and café, craft shops and an educational discovery centre. This is a popular park with over 350,000 people visiting the park annually from a wide catchment area, and it supports a varied events programme in partnership with Coombe Abbey Hotel and Go Ape.
- 1.4. There is a clear vision for the park supported by the Green Space Strategy; to be a destination of choice for the people of Coventry, Warwickshire and beyond when seeking exciting yet affordable outdoor leisure activities. This complements the Council’s health and wellbeing agenda, seeking to promote outdoor, explorative and educational play for the young people in our region.
- 1.5. Successive reductions in the City Council’s revenue budgets has placed an increasing emphasis on maximising the income generating potential from all assets and necessitates new ways of funding the City Council’s ambitious vision for parks.
- 1.6. CAP has delivered significant improvements in the visitor experience over the last 18 months, with new features, experiences and events available to the people in our region. For example Go Ape, the Bug Hotel, outdoor cinema, the Coombe Weekender, the refreshed café, new cycling facilities, the electric children’s cars and the much improved parking system. Each of these initiatives have been delivered to the benefit of visitors, and on commercially sustainable basis.
- 1.7. However, the play provision at the park is now out-dated and in continuous decline despite the maintenance programmes. Local competitor visitor attractions are offering a better play experience, which could in time undermine CAP visitor numbers.
- 1.8. There are two separate children’s play facilities provided within Coombe Country Park. The largest is located adjacent to the visitor centre and contains a range of individual play items designed to accommodate children aged 4 – 7 years and 8 – 13 years old. The play items include swings, modular climbing units, slides and a basket swing. The play area was constructed in 2004 and much of the equipment is now reaching the end of it’s economic life. Throughout the year there are regularly periods when the play area is closed off to the public due to repair requirements and /or maintenance issues.
- 1.9. Although popular, this is a traditional style play facility and offers limited value in terms of stimulating creativity, and challenging and exciting children. Further, its design does not sit well within the natural setting of Coombe Abbey or its future vision.

- 1.10. The second area is located within the Country Park adjacent to the woodland area in Wartrums field near Top Pool Lodge and known as the Climbing Forest. The facility was built in 2006 and consists of a range of timber constructed items of equipment including spiders web, hammock, climbing rope and balance beams. Although popular, this facility offers limited opportunity and could benefit greatly from being enhanced to further increase the play value providing a range of challenging and exciting experiences.
- 1.11. Feedback received is that visitors to CAP are mainly from Coventry, Rugby, Nuneaton and Leicester. Some visitors, however, are travelling from as far as Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds.
- 1.12. An opportunity exists to complement the success of Go Ape and other park initiatives with the replacement of the existing play provision located at the visitor centre and significantly enhance the Climbing Forest experience with an adventure play facility. A capital investment of £800k to replace and update both children's play facilities and remodel the existing car parking facilities to accommodate the anticipated increase in visitor numbers will further improve and enhance the visitor experience at CAP and a projected surplus contributing to the Councils medium -term financial strategy.
- 1.13. The importance of play in a child's development and wellbeing is well recognised and documented. Play helps a child build confidence, develop social skills, increase self-esteem and self-respect, improve physical and mental health, increase confidence, develop new skills and helps with problem solving and dealing with new situations.
- 1.14. The proposed new facilities at the visitor centre and in the forest would be of a distinct, bespoke, themed and unique design and offer a real step change in children's play provision. The design and construction would fit naturally and sensitively into the park topography and historic landscape of the Country Park environment, making use of the natural elements and environment and complement other proposed developments within the park in line with its vision. The proposed location of the pay and play adventure play facility is shown appendix 1. The development would be subject to the necessary planning consent from Rugby Borough Council. Appendix 2 gives an indication of the type of adventure play facility being proposed.
- 1.15. The unique and attractive design will offer an exciting and challenging play environment, purposefully designed to provide those play opportunities and wide range of play experiences so important in a child's development. The facility would be equally accessible to both disabled and able-bodied children, allow children of different ages, abilities and backgrounds to mix and play together, provide opportunities for children to experience challenge and learn about the environment.
- 1.16. The proposed unique play experience will be delivered under a design and build contract with a focus on play experience over cost. Initial estimates from potential providers indicate a build cost of c.£650,000.
- 1.17. Market research has been completed for the entire scheme and it has demonstrated that typically the installation of a high-quality play experience delivers a 15% to 20% uplift in park visitor numbers. The Cotswold Wildlife Park saw this increase in footfall within 6 months of opening. At Coombe this would equate to some additional 70,000 visitors every year making use of the parking and café provision, and in itself raising the profile of the park.
- 1.18. In addition, the market research also indicated that the paid for facilities of the type being proposed for Coombe rarely experience fewer than 100,000 visitors a year making use of the play experience. With the existing footfall at Coombe, and its comparability with venues such as the Cotswold Wildlife Park, it is felt this is a reasonable number of visitors anticipated to use the play area.

- 1.19. It is important that the play area at the visitor centre will remain free to use. This play area attracts parents of younger children to the park for amenity value, and encourages the use of the café located next to the play facility. This also means that free to use play equipment will continue to be provided at the park.
- 1.20. Given the nature and high value experience offered by the facility located in the forest it is considered reasonable, affordable and offers value to propose that a nominal charge of £2 (inc VAT) per child up to a maximum of £5 (in VAT) per family (maximum of 4 children, direct family members) could be levied for the use of the facility. This would give access for a full days usage, and is considerably less costly than many other attractions for young people. Regulated access to the paid for play will designed into the proposals and submitted to planning. However, it is likely to involve the use of coloured wrist bands sold at the visitor centre or Top Pool kiosk, and the scanned in at a turnstile similar to the process used at the Wave.
- 1.21. Based on 100,000 children pa this would generate an annual income of approximately £132,800 (net of VAT).
- 1.22. To accommodate the anticipated increased annual visitor numbers that would result from the new facility (and indeed other park developments that have sought to increase park footfall) the proposals also include for the reconfiguring of the existing car park facility arrangement which will create at least 300 additional car parking spaces. The cost of this work is estimated at £150,000. The provision of additional parking will contribute greatly to enhancing the overall visitor experience, and the increased footfall to the park could potentially increase car park income by a further £41,600pa (net of VAT).

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1. Option 1 - Do nothing. However, this will mean the existing play area provision will require replacement within the next few years as it reaches the end of its practicable life. The design and type of equipment and facility layout is traditional in character and does not fit well within natural environment of the Country park. It will also be inconsistent with other proposals to develop the park and restrict potential income generation. The estimated cost of refurbishing the play would be approximately £150,000 with no financial benefit as it would be difficult to justify introducing a charge for the use of this.
- 2.2. Option 2 – Replace the existing play facility and enhance the tree climbing play facility with a unique adventure play experience along with an increased car parking facility. This will complement other proposed developments for the park, which will offer an income generating potential and contribute greatly in establishing the park as a major local and regional visitor attraction. This is the recommended option.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1. No consultation has taken place on the establishment proposed unique adventure play experience. Planning Permission will be required for this facility and consultation will be undertaken as part of that process.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

Procurement during November 2019 to January 2020

Design during February to April 2020.

Planning submitted May 2020.

On positive determination, it is anticipated that construction works will commence in Autumn 2020 with completion during Summer 2021.

The Adventure Play Experience intends to start operating Summer 2021.

5. Comments of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services

5.1. Financial implications

The capital cost of the replacement of the play equipment and the reconfiguration of the existing car park facilities is estimated to cost in the region of £800,000 in total. It is proposed that this would be funded from Corporate Capital Resources on an invest to save basis in order to generate a revenue income stream for the Council to contribute to the Medium Term Financial Strategy. The expected return on investment is described below.

The Procurement and Design of a Unique Play Area.

This phase of the project is expected to be carried out between November 2019 and February 2020 at a cost of £650k with the build being completed between Autumn 2020 and Summer 2021.

The annual financial cost of funding the investment @ 3.75% over 20 years (i.e. the estimated life of the equipment) is £46,775. There are no additional staffing costs, however, there will be a nominal cost of £5k per year to cover associated sundry costs, including regular inspection of the play equipment, repair, maintenance and cleaning.

Modelling has been carried out using the market research described above and the expected demand for such a facility anticipates that it could attract a minimum of 100,000 users per year. It is proposed to introduce a charge for each use of the facility of £2.00 per child or a family ticket at £5.00.

Although up to 100,000 users per year will be anticipated, income has initially been assumed at 60%, 75% and 80% of capacity (respectively). This also takes account of discounts for larger families.

Improvements to the Car Park.

The improvements to the car park including associated payment equipment will be completed over the winter (2019/20) and will create an additional 300 car park spaces. The annual financial cost of funding the improvements to the car park (@ 3.75% over 10 years) is £18,264. At an average charge of £5 per day this is expected to generate additional car parking income of £41,600 per year (net of VAT).

Table 1: Revenue Costs/Benefits

	Year 1 £000's	Year 2 £000's	Year 3 (Ongoing) £000's
Expenditure			
Capital Finance Repayments	65	65	65
R&M/Inspection of Equipment	5	5	5

Gross Expenditure	70	70	70
Income			
Play Area	-99.6	-124.5	-132.8
Car Park	-41.6	-41.6	-41.6
Total Income	-141.2	-166.1	-174.4
Net	-71.2	-96.1	-104.4

This gives a yield of 22.4% pa, or 13.0% pa including the debt servicing costs at year 3 and beyond.

5.2. Legal implications

The procurement(s) referred to in this report will be completed pursuant to the requirements of all valid public procurement laws and in accordance with the Council's rules for contract.

6. Other implications

6.1. How will this contribute to the Council's Plan? (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)

The provision of unique adventure play experience at Coombe Country Park will increase the leisure offer to both Coventry residents and tourists visiting the City. As well as providing a further opportunity for residents to take part in fun physical exercise.

The provision of the facility will provide an additional revenue stream to the City Council.

6.2. How is risk being managed?

Financial risks are managed through monthly monitoring meetings of the capital programme board team. Risk assessments are carried out as part of the design process to ensure that risks are designed out and that construction takes place by an approved contractor in a safe way.

6.3. What is the impact on the organisation?

None

6.4. Equalities and Consultation Analysis (ECA)

The report recommendations do not affect the Council's policy, provision of any service or its statutory functions. It is not required to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment.

6.5. Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None

6.6. Implications for partner organisations?

None

Report author(s):

Name and job title:

Graham Hood
Head of Streetpride and Greenspace

Directorate:

Place

Tel and email contact:

Tel: 02476 83 2194

Email: graham.hood@coventry.gov.uk

Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Directorate or organisation	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Lara Knight	Governance Services Co-ordinator	Place	25 th Oct 19	25 th Oct 2019
Grant Mckelvie	Commercial Business Director	Place	23 rd Oct 19	24 th Oct 2019
Andrew Walster	Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services		23 rd Oct 19	24 th Oct 2019
Names of approvers for submission: (officers and members)				
Martin Yardley	Deputy Chief Executive	Place	24 th Oct 19	28 th Oct 2019
Phil Helm	Finance Manager	Place	23 rd Oct 19	24 th Oct 2019
Rob Parkes	Team Leader (Place) Legal Services	Place	21 st Oct 19	23 rd Oct 2019
Cllr AS Khan	Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities		22 nd Oct 19	22 nd Oct 2019
Cllr J Mutton	Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources		29 th Oct 2019	29 th Oct 2019

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