

Scrutiny committee

Report of head of economy, leisure and property

Author: Trudy Godfrey

Telephone: 01235 540346

Textphone: 18001 01235 540346

E-mail: trudy.godfrey@southandvale.gov.uk

Executive member responsible: Elaine Ware

Tel: 01793 783026

E-mail: elaine.ware@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

To: Scrutiny committee

DATE: 15 January 2015

The Abbey project

Recommendation

1. The committee is invited to:
 - comment upon the three scenarios that have been identified for the site through consultation with 30 different community groups and 60 young people at Fitzharrys and Larkmead Schools
 - make recommendations to the cabinet members for parks and for economy, leisure and property for them to take into account during the public consultation
 - consider the best ways of reaching all members of the community to ensure that the voting process is as democratic as possible.

Purpose of report

1. Abbey Meadow is a strategically important riverside site that, with some investment, could become significantly more attractive and improve Abingdon's offer as a visitor destination. Officers carried out research and consultation to identify "*A vision for Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens that will build on the area's strengths as public open space and as a leisure and recreation destination.*"
2. Officers have reviewed existing consultation evidence and have consulted a wide range of community organisations in Abingdon to identify ways to improve Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens.

- The purpose of this report is to present the research and consultation work that has been carried out on the Abbey project to date, and present three scenarios that have been identified through reviewing existing consultation evidence and through community consultations.

Strategic objectives

- This project will contribute towards the corporate objectives of “building the local economy” and “continue to invest to improve the viability and attractiveness of our towns”, in this case Abingdon.

Background

- Abbey Meadow is the Vale’s busiest park and is one of Abingdon’s most visited attractions. It is particularly busy in the spring and summer months. The site comprises a play park, pitch and putt, tennis court, outdoor swimming pool and a riverside. In 2013, there were 11,420 swimmers at the outdoor pool, and typically visitor numbers range from 6,000 to 12,000 p.a. The total net cost to the public sector to run the pool was £54,000 in 2013 and there were just over 11,000 swimmers, which equates to a net cost to the public sector (after swimmer’s entry charges) of £4.80 per swim.
- The Vale Council maintains Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow and spends just under £60,000 every year on routine grounds maintenance for Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow.
- The number of people using the facilities is declining over time:

NUMBERS ATTENDING		2011	2012	2013	2014
PITCH AND PUTT		435	284	351	293
CRAZY GOLF	Adults	396	235	236	201
CRAZY GOLF	Juniors	802	598	733	454
TENNIS COURT	(one hour)	2	11	11	3
TENNIS COURT	(half hour)	78	53	59	61
Total users		1736	1181	1390	1012

- The Vale Council employs a seasonal attendant at a cost of around £7,000 p.a. and the total income received in 2014/15 was just short of £2,000. Income has been reducing generally overtime as the quality of the facilities has deteriorated.

9. Abbey Gardens are designated as a scheduled ancient monument as the Abingdon Abbey, which dates back to the seventh century, once stood on the site. The layout of the outer wall to the abbey is marked on the ground with stone blocks, and interpretation boards in the gardens give an impression of how the site would have looked when the abbey was there.
10. The gardens comprise two main areas; the formal garden area with flower beds, herbaceous borders, seating and an Italian walkway; and open parkland with a number of mature trees, an ornamental lake and a folly that stands near a statue of Queen Victoria. The lake is a haven for wildlife and is home to the nationally scarce water vole. The Abbey Gardens offers visitors a quiet retreat where they can relax, enjoy the flower displays, explore the archaeology or take part in informal recreational activities. In July 2013, Abbey Gardens was judged one of the best parks in the country and it was awarded Green Flag status for the fifth year in a row. The Green Flag is a national award that recognises parks that are well maintained and managed with excellent facilities. The gardens first scooped the Green Flag Award in 2009 following a five-year restoration project to transform the site to the way it looked in its Victorian heyday.

Development constraints

11. A number of development constraints associated with the sites have been identified and are included at appendix 1 attached to this report.

Review of the existing consultation evidence

12. Officers reviewed consultation evidence that was carried out in Abingdon in recent years, including: annual surveys of the users of Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens; The Choose Abingdon consultation work carried out over 2009 to 2012; residents consultation work in support of the South Abingdon community-led plan; and visitor surveys carried out by Hidden Britain in 2012. A summary of the existing consultation evidence is provided in appendix 2 attached to this report. In short, previous consultations support investment in Abbey Meadow to make it an even better place for visitors and residents. In particular, teenagers have been identified as a particular user group that would benefit from more activities and free access to sport and leisure facilities; it would be desirable to have additional seating by the river; make better use of the riverside location and the views; upgraded playgrounds and equipment, an adventure playground for children aged 10+; open-air gym; picnic areas; and upgrades to paths to allow circular walks to be made.
13. At an internal officer meeting on 2 October, officers suggested that access and signage were key considerations and that additional play equipment should be focussed on those not presently catered for (i.e. children aged 10+) and highlighted that it should be a priority to get Blue Flag status for Abbey Meadow. Parents have fed back to officers a request that the splash area is fenced for health and safety reasons.

Consultation – October 2014 - February 2015

14. The Vale Council has committed itself to creating a vision for the future of Abbey Garden and Meadow in Abingdon. We think it is important the vision reflects the views and aspirations of people living in the town and the rest of the district. The

project has the opportunity to bring about significant improvements to the site and have a positive impact on the attractiveness of the town as a whole. However, there are some significant risks, as the site is prone to flooding, subject to restrictive covenants, there are heritage considerations and it is in a conservation area.

15. If public consultation on the project is poorly managed, then there is a risk of raising public expectations which cannot be met. The worst case scenario is a high-profile consultation that results in a 'wish list' of desired improvements to the site that are not viable.

16. To mitigate this risk, officers devised a two-phased consultation.

Phase one: Informed discussion with key stakeholders to generate initial objectives/ scenarios for the site that take into consideration practical and financial constraints.

17. In October, officers met with groups thought to have a significant stake in the future of the site on a 1-2-1 basis. We wanted to give them early warning of the project, set expectations and get an early steer from them as to what they would like to see happen with the site. Groups engaged were Friends of Abingdon Outdoor Pool, Abbey Brass, Abingdon Town Council, Abingdon Hydro and Friends of Abingdon.

18. Officers also spoke to 60 young people from Larkmead and Fitzharris schools to find out what they would like to see happen to Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow. Their preferences were to have a riverside café / restaurant (with Wi-Fi) instead of the outdoor pool, adventure playground with challenging equipment such as zip-wires, multi purpose outdoor games area, and more seating preferably with shelters.

19. These early conversations allowed officers, with support from Hidden Britain (tourism consultants and experts in community engagement), to devise a workshop for community groups and councillors which was held on 4 November. The workshop was attended by approximately 60 people, representing 30 different community groups. A list of those attending the workshop is attached as appendix 3 to this report. We asked participants for their views on overall objectives for the site, the visitors it should attract, facilities that should be retained and specific improvements that could be made.

20. Data gathered from 1-2-1 meetings, activities with young people and the stakeholder workshop shows that groups have different uses for, and views on the site. Hidden Britain reported on the outcomes of these consultations and advised there were three broad-brush scenarios that could be developed, which set out distinct objectives that appeal to most groups. These are:

- a focus on structured sport and recreation (i.e. invest to keep the pool open)
- a focus on tourism and leisure (i.e. develop a café / restaurant on the riverside at the pool site to make it a more informal open access, all year round venue)
- a focus on green open space (i.e. low key development that is open access and makes the most of the natural riverside landscape).

21. To make the three scenarios distinctive, there needs to be some mutually exclusive facilities. For example, the first scenario proposes to invest significant

sums to allow the outdoor pool to continue to operate. The second scenario proposes to use the site currently occupied by the outdoor pool to facilitate the development of a riverside café / restaurant; and the third scenario would close the outdoor pool and return much of the land at Abbey Meadow to public open space with low key developments such as outdoor performance space, walking trails, adventure playground.

22. The scenarios afford the council some degree of confidence that it can deliver on at least some of the improvements stakeholders have put forward.

Phase two: District-wide public consultation to identify which of the three scenarios proposed by stakeholder groups is the most popular.

23. Since the scenarios have only been developed with input from key stakeholder groups to date, it is important that the Vale Council consults the wider public on their views.

24. On the advice of the corporate consultation officer, the leader of the council, portfolio holder for economy, leisure and property, and portfolio holder for parks considered a number of options for the consultation.

25. It was decided that there should be a widely publicised, high profile vote on the three scenarios in February 2015. The vote will give people the opportunity to get behind one of three possible visions for the site.

26. Officers will also provide people with limited opportunity to comment on some of the specific improvements that could be made for each scenario.

27. Officers do not think it is appropriate to leave development options for the site wide open, as doing so would effectively override the contributions of stakeholder groups to date and risks resulting in a wish list of improvements that the Vale Council cannot deliver within the available budget.

Abingdon Area Committee

28. At the request of the Abingdon Area Committee, officers provided an update on the project at the committee meeting on 14 November 2014 and asked the committee for its comments and recommendations to inform the consultation process.

29. In the table below, we highlight the concerns raised by the committee, and how officers will address these concerns:

Concerns raised at Abingdon Area Committee:	How officers are addressing these concerns:
Concern that the process was rushed – it needs to be more detailed and take longer	Officers reviewed existing consultation evidence that had been undertaken in Abingdon over the last five years, and programmed realistic consultation timescales including minimum six weeks for public consultation

<p>The three proposed scenarios are divisive and confusing</p>	<p>The scenarios represent three possible visions for the site that reflect the views expressed by almost 100 consultees that were identified for their high use of the site, including 60 young people. The consultation officer and project manager worked with experts in community engagement and tourism consultants - Hidden Britain - to develop the three scenarios based on the consultation process and ensuring that it reflected best practice in consultation. Due to budgetary and development constraints, the three visions are mutually exclusive in terms of: outdoor pool, riverside café or restaurant and performance space. The wider public consultation will ask the public to choose between these three visions (or scenarios), but there will be some flexibility in terms of the facilities that can be delivered on each. In this way, officers will be able to identify which other facilities are most highly rated.</p>
<p>Can different ideas be used from the different scenarios? A more 'mix and match' approach or using transferable voting for different options</p>	<p>During public consultation, officers will allow flexibility in terms of allowing Vale residents to identify their priorities for a wide range of facilities.</p>
<p>How can you stop people from voting more than once?</p>	<p>Residents will be asked for their name, address, email and postcode so that officers can verify that respondents have had only one vote each.</p>
<p>Consultation is best carried out in summer, when most people would be using the current facilities, especially those considered 'hard to reach' and at different times of day;</p> <p>Use market stalls to consult</p>	<p>In the consultation carried out to date, officers reached out to different user groups to make sure that they had a say. During the wider public consultation, officers will take space in the community shop, spend a day in the Market Place in Abingdon encouraging people to vote, and work with councillors to encourage participation locally.</p>
<p>Concern that district councillors were not consulted</p>	<p>The project was promoted in Infocus and district councillors were consulted via the Abingdon Area Committee and scrutiny committee. The public consultation will be widely promoted.</p>
<p>Project name: Confusion as to the name of the project in referring to Abbey grounds, gardens and meadow</p>	<p>The project is referred to as the Abbey Project, covering Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens. This will be clear in the consultation leaflet.</p>

Facilities:	
Concerns about fencing in the splash park;	Noted. Comments passed onto parks service manager and portfolio holder.
Poor golf and tennis facilities;	Noted. Comments passed onto parks service manager and portfolio holder.
Improving toilet facilities should be a top priority;	Cabinet member for technical services considers that the toilets are a priority.
Facilities should not be assessed for their commercial viability as they are community assets;	Usage is important.
Lack of signage and information about existing facilities;	Noted.
Key-holders of the tennis courts have not been included in the data for usage	We have requested this data from the service manager.
In terms of risks, need to specify timescale and budget for improvements	This will be made clear in the public consultation leaflet.
Need a 'Big Idea' and a much bigger budget – could invite West Waddy ADP architects to offer proposals for this 'Big Idea'	Noted. Officers are working with West Waddy ADP architects on this project to generate designs that reflect the consultation
Lack of maintenance budget	Noted. Comments passed onto parks service manager and portfolio holder.

Next steps

30. Following the consultation outlined above, these steps are being undertaken:

- work with quantity surveyors and other experts (both within and external to the Vale Council) to put indicative costs to the three scenarios to inform the public consultation
 - consultation with statutory bodies e.g. planning, Environment Agency, English Heritage, HLF, Sport England etc in order to ensure all scenarios are feasible and possible before releasing to public consultation
 - produce indicative drawings and artist impressions for the three scenarios
- the cabinet member for economy, leisure and property will make an individual cabinet member decision to approve the approach and timing for the public consultation
- public consultation – open to all Vale residents - on the three scenarios in February 2015.

Commented [C1]: We need to add in cabinet approval for public consultation and decide whether to seek scrutiny committee's views as a consultee

31. The public consultation will comprise:

- online consultation
- physical voting through a period of display in the Abingdon community shop during one week in February
- paper versions of the consultation will be available and disseminated - how do councillors think we can encourage as many residents as possible to participate in the consultation?

32. Following the consultation phase, officers will take a report to cabinet in summer 2015 to discuss the vision for the site with the greatest public support, agree next steps and any funding requirements.

Financial implications

33. Cabinet members asked officers to submit a discretionary capital growth bid of £500,000 to allow the capital improvements to be made. This is the working budget that the quantity surveyor and architect are working to. There may be revenue budget consequences, depending on the option that is chosen. For instance, we may be able to reduce our revenue costs by some £7,000 if we no longer need a leisure operative in Abbey Meadow collecting fees for the crazy golf and tennis during the summer holidays.

34. The revenue budget implications will be known in full after the public consultation is complete, and detailed costs have been received. At this time officers will need to review the budget position and either submit revenue growth bids or offer up savings.

Legal implications

35. As mentioned below in appendix 1, there are some legal issues that need to be taken into account when deciding which scenario is most suitable, and also which may need to be addressed before a plan is recommended:

- The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) will need to give its approval to any scheme, although its main focus will be on Abbey Gardens and the area around the existing recreational area. These were the main areas that received grant funding and consequently HLF needs to give its consent to any alterations to existing layouts. The recreational area is of lesser importance as HLF provided little direct funding for any improvements to this area and, therefore, any constraints on development of Abbey Meadow would be unlikely.
- There is a covenant affecting Abbey Meadow (again as mentioned in appendix 1), the benefit of which is held by the Master and Governors of the Hospital of Christ of Abingdon ("the Charity"). This prevents the erection of any building or other structure on Abbey Meadow, other than such buildings or structures as may be ancillary to the intended use of the land as a public open space for recreational purposes. As none of the schemes contemplate any building other than for ancillary purposes, this covenant should not be breached. However, it is recommended that any development plans should be communicated to the charity to ensure that no problems arise at a later date.
- There is a water pipe owned by Thames Water on the Abbey Meadow site, which runs around the edges of the site from the river. There are the usual

covenants not to build over this pipe or plant any trees within a certain distance of the pipe. There should not be an issue as long as the location of this pipe is taken into account in any development. Thames Water will have a plan of the location, which can be used for consultation on any development of the waterside area

Commented [PV2]: At [planning application stage?

- The existing car parking area must continue to be used as a car park.

36. In conclusion, as long as the above matters are taken into account in terms of the extent of the proposed development, and consultations with the appropriate bodies are done at an early stage, the legal risks of development at Abbey Meadow as outlined in this report should be minimal.

Risks

37. The main risk is not being able to deliver on public expectations raised during the consultation due to time and budget constraints. We have designed the consultation and we have engaged professionals (quantity surveyor and architect) to minimise these risks.

Conclusion

38. The committee is invited to:

- comment upon the three scenarios that have been identified for the site through consultation with 30 different community groups and 60 young people at Fitzharrys and Larkmead Schools
- make recommendations to the cabinet members for parks and for economy, leisure and property for them to take into account during the public consultation
- consider the best ways of reaching all members of the community to ensure that the voting process is as democratic as possible.

Appendix 1

Commented [PV3]: See note, front cover

Development constraints

39. A number of development constraints associated with the sites have been identified and are included at Appendix 2, including the following:

- **conservation area:** Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens are in a conservation area, which protects the special architectural and historic interests of the area
- **heritage assets:** most of Abbey Garden has scheduled ancient monument status as Abingdon Abbey once stood on the site
- **floodzone** – the development site floods regularly and is categorised as either floodzone 2 or 3, and this will impact on the type and location of development.
- **landfilled gravel extraction site** - Abbey Meadow previously formed part of a gravel extraction site, which has been landfilled, but parts of the site suffer from subsidence. The areas that are worst affected include the tennis courts and pitch and putt. This does not preclude any new development, but further ground investigations at the specific locations for any new development will need to be undertaken to determine what, if any, mitigation measures are needed.
- **restrictive covenants** – Abbey Meadow is subject to a restrictive covenant that prevents the erection of any building or structure other than such buildings that are ancillary to the intended use of the land as public open space for recreational purposes.
- **Thames Water** owns a water pipe on the Abbey Meadow site, which runs around the edges of the site from the river. There are covenants not to build over this or plant any trees within a certain distance of the pipe. There should not be an issue as long as the location of this pipe is taken into account in any development. Thames Water will have a plan of the location which can be used for consultation on any development of the waterside area
- **grant funding conditions** – the Vale Council received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2002, and the areas funded by the grant were extensive, including Abbey Gardens and the children's play area. We would need to consult HLF on proposed changes, and it is unlikely to give its consent to any material alterations to the areas that were improved in 2002.
- **ecology** - ecological issues may arise depending on the proximity to the river
- **moorings** - a moorings policy is currently being reviewed by the Vale Council, which will consider the type of enforcement actions to take. This is likely to include charging for overnight moorings, which are free at present, in order to pay for enforcement.
- **funding** – officers have submitted a discretionary capital growth bid to improve the area. It may also be possible to use private sector capital, and to apply for grants from other bodies, depending on what is proposed.
- **Sport England** – will need to be consulted about the loss of any sporting facility.

Appendix 2 – Feedback from previous Abingdon-based consultations

Feedback from users of Abingdon Abbey Meadow and Abbey Gardens

The parks team gather feedback from the visitors to the park each year. Generally satisfaction with Abbey Gardens is very high, with visitors providing very positive feedback that they are beautiful, quiet gardens with space to picnic and relax. Feedback from Abbey Meadow is less favourable, and in recent years comments have provided quite a high level of dissatisfaction with public toilets, the tennis courts and crazy golf which are now in a poor state of repair.

Choose Abingdon Partnership public consultation 2009-2012

Choose Abingdon Partnership (CHAP) undertook large-scale public consultation exercises to identify Abingdon's strengths and weaknesses and to identify project ideas that would help enhance town centre vitality and improve linkages between the town and the river.

Specifically, CHAP Strategy and Action Plan for 2012 onwards identified the following priorities:

- Lack of 'family' things to do within Abingdon
- Lack of music & entertainment
- Lack of a single major visitor attraction
- Low footfall in town centre
- Poor evening 'offer'
- Poor access and signage from the centre of town

CHAP Strategy and Action Plan for 2012 onwards identified the following projects:

- Hydro scheme with visitor centre (the hydro scheme is likely to proceed, but plans for the visitor centre have been put on hold)
- Need to assess and improve leisure offer at Abbey Meadow
- Larger redevelopment of Abbey Meadow as leisure offering
- Assess and improve leisure offer far side of river
- Summer Festival (one or two week package and main event)
- Riverside Tourist Information point for summer season
- Signage and interpretation linking river to town

The need to assess and improve the leisure offer at Abbey Meadow was given a very high weighting in the CHAP Strategy.

“The Abingdon Visitor Survey, 2012” by Hidden Britain

Hidden Britain undertook over 200 face to face visitors in Abingdon at a range of different locations within the town and at the riverside between May and July 2012. They found that over half of visitors were aged over 56 years. This highlights a need to attract younger visitors to the town.

The report highlights Abingdon's USP as its setting on the river and its historic character are key features within its visitor economy, offer and experience and should be placed front and centre within any promotional or developmental strategy taken forward. However there is the need to implement a clear and consistent strategy and

implementation model to direct visitor and tourism development. New developments, infrastructure and facilities should be prioritised to complement and improve the Abingdon visitor offer.

There were some basic areas where Abingdon did not do so well with the following requiring specific attention:

- Toilets in very poor condition and seasonal opening
- High relative proportion of vacant shops in key areas
- Signage pointing in wrong direction, and better signage between the river and town
- Questionable location of map boards.
- Literature available on the town was confused and duplicated itself
- Lack of Sunday or evening opening for many of the retail outlets

The public toilets issue should be addressed as a key priority, these facilities are key to the visitor experience, and a poor experience is likely to be a memorable one even if the rest of the visit has been positive. In essence the details do matter - "Sense of destination – the extent to which it has met a visitor's needs and made a strong and positive impression – is therefore vital to secure repeat trade and sustainable economic development." In tandem with toilets is the upkeep of the public realm. Abingdon scored very highly for the physical appearance of the town, its buildings, green space and street furniture, and this should be maintained going forward as it again it is an important detail that impacts on the visitor experience.

Abingdon is a little lower than anticipated on what could be termed visitor attractions and activities with only 17 business or organisations providing these services. Given the nature of the destination, encouragement or development of sites and activities of visitor interest would be advantageous in the future. However Abingdon does perform very well once we add in the interpretive activities that make the most of its natural and historical features (the 20 promoted routes and the various events in particular). But this can always be expanded and built upon and work should be undertaken to ensure these activities are well publicised and the content not lost (or in the case of the promoted routes made available clearly to visitors either online in centrally organised place or visibly in situ).

A number of 'themes' emerged from the research in terms of comments supplied by visitors as to what improvements they would like to see in Abingdon. These included:-

1. Retail offer – improve the range and quality of shopping
2. Improving signage – particularly pedestrian signage and improvements between the town and the river
3. Traffic and transport was a key problem for many people, almost exclusively relating to the congestion and traffic flow caused by the one-way system.
4. Improvements to the river were mentioned many times, with specific requests for more improved facilities by the river (food, toilets and seating) as well as improvements to the riverside path and better signage and promotion of the lock and riverside walks.

The South Abingdon Consultation for their Community-Led Plan

South Abingdon residents developed a questionnaire, in the context of their Community-led plan which was not taken forward to completion, but several hundred responses were received when the questionnaire was issued in 2011/12. These responses that related to the Abbey Meadow / Abbey Gardens area were summarised by the shared corporate projects officer as:-

- More activities for teenagers to do
- Seating by the river
- Improving the views
- Better playgrounds and equipment, and specifically a 5-12 year old adventure playground
- An open-air gym
- Picnic areas
- Circular walks
- Basketball Court and keep-fit classes or facilities
- More seating by the river
- Develop riverside park (make better use of space & area: nature walks, play park & keep fit circuit.)

Internal workshop with Vale Council staff

An internal workshop was held on 2 October 2014, and officers from most of the service areas attended. Some of the ideas and suggestions for improvements to Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow include:-

- better facilities for older children and teenagers
- Improved seating, picnic areas and bins
- Café / restaurant
- BBQ pits
- Improved signage between the river and the town
- Bandstand or amphitheatre – better events space
- Circular walking routes
- Poetry trail
- Longer summer season for pool and water feature
- Arts centre

Appendix 3

Community Groups attending the 4 Nov event

Abbey Brass
Abbey Close resident
ABC Tots
Abingdon artists
Abingdon Artists & Ox Art Groups
Abingdon Carbon Cutters
Abingdon Flower Club
Abingdon Hydro
Abingdon Museum
Abingdon Naturalist Society
Abingdon Town Band
Abingdon Town Council
Air Cadets
Bid Team
Carbon Cutters
Choose Abingdon Partnership
Christ's Hospital of Abingdon
Drama Group
Friends of Abingdon
Friends of Abingdon Outdoor Pool
NCT Abingdon
Oxfordshire Arts
Pasiol Play
Preston Road Community Centre
Silver Band
South Abingdon Resident Plan
St Helens Baby & toddler group
VWHDC
Womens Institute