

Cabinet report



Report of head of economy, leisure and property

Author: Suzanne Malcolm/Philip Vincent

Telephone: 01235 547619

Textphone: 18001 01235 547619

E-mail: suzanne.malcolm@southandvale.gov.uk

Wards affected: All

Cabinet member responsible: Councillor Matthew Barber

Tel: 07816 481452

E-mail: councillor@matthewbarber.co.uk

To: Cabinet

DATE: 10 July 2015

Vision for Abbey Meadow

Recommendations

That cabinet agrees to:

- (a) the wording in the consultation summary as set out in appendix 1, attached to this report, so that this can be published on the Vale Council's website
- (b) proceed with the appointment of a project manager to investigate the cost implications of the improvement works to the outdoor pool and the other top ten priorities
- (c) develop a programme of phased activity to implement these works, bringing forward growth bids as required.

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to update the cabinet following the recent public consultation on the future of Abbey Meadow, and to set out a response to the consultation and the way forward.

Strategic objectives

2. The vision for Abbey Meadow will contribute towards the strategic and 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

3. An approved capital growth bid of £500,000 was allocated in 2015/16 financial year to support the improvement of this strategically important riverside site that, with some

investment, could become significantly more attractive and improve Abingdon's offer as a visitor destination.

4. Since October 2014 there have been two phases of consultation on the future of Abbey Meadow. Phase one was an informal discussion with key stakeholders to generate initial objectives/scenarios for the site that took into consideration practical and financial constraints. Phase two was a district-wide public consultation to identify which of the three scenarios discussed by the stakeholder groups was the most popular.
5. The three scenarios that were consulted on were:
 - scenario A – a place to swim and play
 - scenario B – a place to relax and unwind
 - scenario C – a flexible outdoor space.
6. The consultation allowed the public to select their preferred scenario from A, B and C, but also within that scenario to rank in order of preference what additional facilities they would like to see. A free text comments box was also provided.

Consultation results

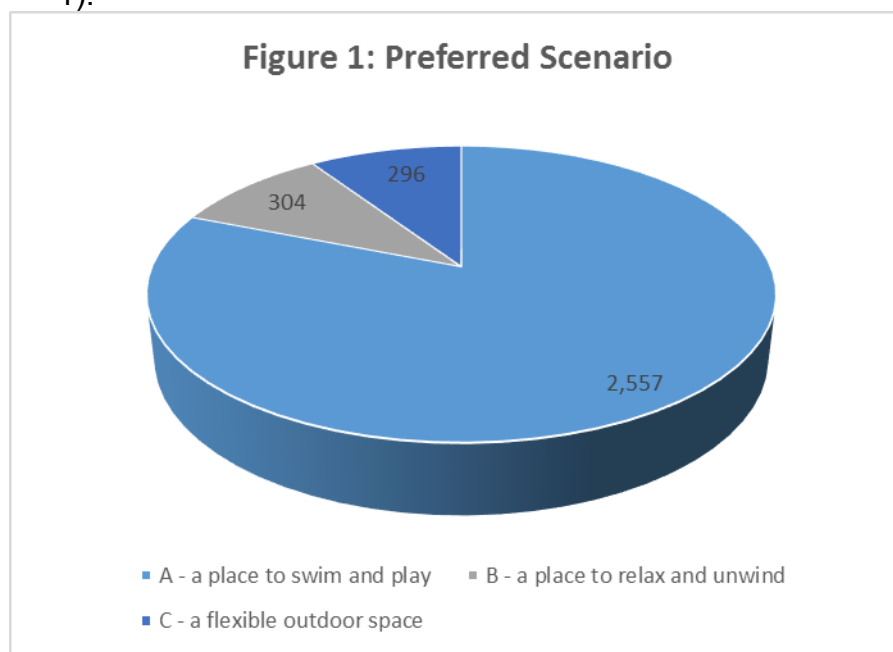
Phase one

7. The Vale Council sought the views of key stakeholders with an interest in Abbey Meadow in October 2014. This involved 1-2-1 meetings with representatives from five groups that had strong connections to the site, as well as a more formal workshop which was attended by 29 community groups.
8. Early discussions with these stakeholders showed there was an appetite for improving Abbey Meadow. The stakeholders considered that many existing facilities needed to be repaired or replaced to ensure the park remains a popular attraction for local residents and visitors.
9. Common objectives for the site included:
 - making the site appeal to a broader spectrum of people
 - extending seasonal usage of the site
 - improving access and signage
 - maintaining or increasing the range of leisure activities on offer.
10. However, discussion about the practical and financial limitations of the site exposed some differences of opinion with regards to the relative importance of retaining key facilities/ assets. Some groups expressed a strong preference for keeping facilities, such as the outdoor pool, and building on what's already there. Others felt that the project provided an opportunity to introduce new leisure opportunities. The scenarios developed were a response to this feedback.

Phase Two

11. 3,157 people took part in the district-wide consultation, which ran from 27 February 2015 to 7 April 2015. This excludes 46 duplicate entries, which were removed for the purposes of analysis.

12. 81 per cent of respondents expressed a preference for scenario A – a place to swim and play. Only ten per cent favoured scenario B and nine per cent scenario C (Figure 1).



13. Analysis of the free text comments shows that most of the people who expressed a preference for scenario A did so as they did not want to see the outdoor pool close. Many people spoke about how the pool is part of Abingdon's heritage and represents a unique offer to visitors. The strength of feeling about retaining the pool was also expressed in the form of a 38 Degrees online petition with over 2,500 signatories – roughly comparable to the number of people who voted for scenario A1. This petition was reported to full council at its meeting on 22 May 2015.

14. The comments also showed that the proposal to build a new café/restaurant is divisive. Proponents suggested this would make better use of the park's riverside location or draw more people into the park. Objectors claimed that Abingdon doesn't need any more cafés, would take business away from the town centre or encourage people to be lazy rather than active.

15. The consultation also allowed people to rank in order of preference, other facilities or improvements they would like to see delivered as part of their preferred scenario. It is possible to see how these facilities rank across the three scenarios, to also take into account the views of people who expressed a preference for B and C (Figure 2). The most popular improvements common to all three scenarios were new picnic tables and seating, adventure play equipment and an enhanced splash pad.

¹ <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/save-abbey-meadows-outdoor-pool-abingdon>

Figure 2: Preferred additional facilities/ improvements²

	A score	B score	C score	Total	Rank
New picnic tables and seating	12,118	2,043	2,366	16,527	1
Refurbished changing rooms	16,312	0	0	16,312	2
Adventure play equipment for over 10s	9,728	1,450	4,497	15,675	3
Enhanced splash pad	10,126	1,507	2,115	13,748	4
Improved coffee kiosk	13,389	0	0	13,389	5
Improvements to under 10s play area	8,791	1,363	2,068	12,222	6
Outdoor gym equipment	6,142	779	1,312	8,233	7
Refurbished tennis courts	6,217	785	871	7,873	8
Electricity supply for a mobile ice rink	5,218	974	1,263	7,455	9
Multi-use games area	0	1,189	1,894	3,083	10
Pop-up cafe	0	0	2,363	2,363	11
Outdoor performance space	0	0	2,276	2,276	12
Landscaping improvements	0	0	1,894	1,894	13
Circular walking paths	0	0	1,568	1,568	14
Nature areas and information boards	0	0	1,251	1,251	15
Bandstand	0	997	0	997	16
Public art trail	0	0	772	772	17

16. A more in-depth summary of the consultation has been prepared by the Vale Council's corporate consultation officer for publication on the Vale Council's website, set out in appendix 1, attached to this report.

17. Given the strength of response favouring the retention of the pool, officers recommend that this should be the favoured option and the opportunity to add other favoured facilities to enhance the area should be investigated further.

Financial implications

18. The Vale Council maintains Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow and spends just under £60,000 every year on routine grounds maintenance of these areas.

19. Whilst initial costings were obtained at the time of undertaking the consultation, officers need to undertake further work to understand what works are required, in particular in relation to the swimming pool and changing rooms, which were the favoured options. The next most popular facility requested in scenario A was in relation to the coffee kiosks and officers consider there is an opportunity to create a new-style kiosk and café facility.

20. There are opportunities to look at re-provision of the changing rooms in a different form by incorporating the public toilets (for which the technical and facilities manager holds a £100,000 budget for refurbishment work). There are a number of other valuable improvements that have been voted for as part of the consultation exercise that officers will pursue, in particular those ranked 1 -10 in figure 2 above in order to deliver the vision for Abbey Meadow.

21. Clearly all of these may not be achievable within the existing £500,000 budget allocation and, as such, officers will bring forward growth bids for further phases as required. Some of this budget will be required to cover professional fees needed to

² Scores were arrived at by weighting the ranking respondents gave to each facility/ improvement.

deliver this project and these could be in the region of 15 per cent of the budget, around £75,000 of the £500,000.

22. There will be additional constraints that will need to be considered, for example, additional facilities will potentially require funds to support maintenance costs and the current kiosk has a zero charge currently for non-domestic rates; however, improving it may result in a change of non-domestic rate implications.

Resource and timescale implications

23. To date, the project has been led by the economic development team with support from the consultation and other officers. However, the implementation of the project will be dependent upon the involvement of other teams, particularly the leisure and parks teams, and it may be appropriate for one of these teams to take the project lead. However, none of the teams involved has much spare capacity to take on such a project, particularly in view of existing and committed workloads and, therefore, officers recommend the use of an external project manager to move the project forward, using the £20,000 for strategic property advice included in the 2015/16 budget.
24. Officers will appoint a project manager to manage this project as soon as is practically possible and once the scope of the final scheme has been agreed, we can produce a project time line and consider the resource and timescale implications.
25. Given the seasonal nature of the open air pool, this project will require a lot of work to be carried out and completed by April 2016 to ensure that the pool re-opens at its normal time in May 2016. This may be difficult to achieve, given the timescales involved in working up a final scheme, procuring the necessary contractor(s) and carrying out and completing the works, but it is anticipated that the work can be phased and that some elements can be in place prior to the 2016 season.
26. There are also a number of constraints on the area that need to be fully investigated alongside any improvement plans.

Legal implications

27. There are some legal issues that need to be taken into account in relation to this site that need to be considered in any final scheme:
 - 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, 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 it proposed any building will be 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
- The existing car parking area must continue to be used as a car park.

28. In summary, 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

29. This consultation exercise has raised expectations with residents. These expectations need to be managed particularly in relation to the £500,000 capital budget, unless extra funding can be identified.

Conclusion

30. The vision for Abbey Meadow consultation has clearly attracted significant input from the residents of the district. Therefore, officers recommend that cabinet agrees the wording in the consultation summary as set out in appendix 1, attached to this report, so that this can be published on the Vale Council's website and proceed with the appointment of a project manager to investigate the cost implications of the improvement works to the outdoor pool and the other top ten priorities. Officers also recommend that cabinet agrees to develop a programme of phased activity to implement these works, bringing forward growth bids as required.