

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET – 7 DECEMBER 2011

DEAN CASTLE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2011 – 2016 AND ASSOCIATED STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

Report by Depute Chief Executive / Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To approve and adopt the finalised version of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan, and associated Strategic Environmental Report.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Dean Castle Country Park is East Ayrshire's only designated Country Park. It is situated in the north east of Kilmarnock and extends to over 80 hectares. It was registered in 1981 as Scotland's 14th Country Park and has grown in popularity over its 30 years.
- 2.2 In the last 2 years, visitor figures for the Country Park have significantly increased as the Park has arguably become Ayrshire's top visitor attraction. In 2009 visitor figures reached just over 270,000. This figure had been fairly static between 1997 and 2009 with small fluctuations being recorded at times with adverse weather conditions or during foot and mouth in 2001 when the Country Park had to be closed for 2 months. However, in 2010 the visitor numbers increased by 102% with over 550,000 visits being recorded. This led to it being recognised as the 5th most visited Country Park in Scotland and the 10th most visited free attraction in Scotland. In 2011, this upward trend has continued. By the end of September, visitor numbers had already reached over 770,000 and is forecasted to exceed 900,000 visits by the end of December.
- 2.3 This significant increase in demand for the Country Park and Countryside Services puts significant pressure on facilities that were designed to cope with much smaller numbers. The Management and Development Plan for Dean Castle Country Park will try and address many of the issues brought about by increased pressures.

3. MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR DEAN CASTLE COUNTRY PARK 2011 - 2016

- 3.1 The document sets out the operational context and policies of the Countryside Services team which has management responsibilities for Dean Castle Country Park, the River Ayr Way and specific routes within the Core Path Network. It then goes on to describe and discuss the management approach and projects that will be undertaken at Dean Castle Country Park during the period 2011 to 2016. A full

copy of the Management and Development Plan is available via the Members' Portal.

- 3.2 The purpose of the document is to explain the context in which Dean Castle Country Park sits, to describe what we aim to achieve at the Country Park and to identify through management prescriptions how we will do this. It will also be the basis for on-going discussions about the Country Park's management and give the communities and general public rational for management prescriptions and the opportunity to comment on them.
- 3.3 As well as outlining the regular tasks and responsibilities that Countryside Services have for the management of Dean Castle Country Park, this document will also provide a framework for carrying out enhancements whether recreational or conservational and suggest longer term aspirations. It will also detail changes in existing management techniques that are in response to current public sector policies and trends, as well as in keeping with best value and good practice.
- 3.4 The Management and Development Plan will not only be used to guide the management of the Country Park, but will be used as a tool to attract external investment.
- 3.5 In order to create a more innovative approach to the development and promotion of the Country Park as well as for ease of management, the Country Park will be split into 3 management units. Each management unit will be split further into compartments. A series of projects and management prescriptions are proposed for each compartment.

Zone 1: Historic Management Unit

The main aim is to focus on the key historical legacy of the Dean Estate including the historic, designed landscape by integrating the visitor experience offered within Dean Castle into its surrounding area and managing the landscape in a more historically sympathetic fashion.

The objective for this zone is to restore key aspects of the historic designed landscape creating a sympathetic setting for the Castle and built features which is respectful of the past whilst contemporary in design, encouraging greater appreciation of our local heritage.

Zone 2: Urban Farm Management Unit

'Pet's Corner' is currently the most popular area of the Country Park with over 70% of visitors coming to the Country Park to visit the animals and adventure play area. However, there is currently very little 'turn over' in the animal population. Changing the focus from petting zoo to farm will allow us to develop a breeding programme, concentrating on a smaller number of animal breeds which will result in a more cost effective and vibrant animal area.

The objective is to develop a demonstration Urban Farm which provides opportunities for recreation and education within a rural setting whilst reflecting modern and traditional farming and conservation practices

Zone 3: Countryside Management Unit

The management of this zone will be directed at bringing the extensive woodland resource back into positive management ensuring public safety, biological enhancement, improved recreational and educational opportunities and integration with wider biodiversity and recreational corridors in line with the Central Scotland Green Network.

The objective of the Countryside Zone is to conserve and enhance the landscape value of Dean Castle Country Park by introducing proactive and innovative management which will improve the recreational and educational opportunities whilst encouraging greater biodiversity.

3.6 As well as this zoned approach the management and development plan outlines a number of management objectives that will be addressed and used to develop and improve the Country Park. These objectives will cut across all of the management units and include:

- Outdoor Access: focussing on key routes for promotion within the Country Park and strategic routes which link the Country Park to the wider core path network and neighbouring attractions
- Interpretative Trails: encouraging visitors to explore other areas of the Country Park instead of staying within the locations around the main buildings. This will include informal, fun and innovative interactive trails such as a bird song trail using MP3 players, a fortune telling trail and a geocaching trail using handheld GPS machines.
- Traffic Management: addressing the issue of parking, rationalising these areas and making disabled bays more clearly signposted. There is also the need to address the number of vehicles that access the Country Park.
- Sustainability: exploring opportunities to deliver sustainable forest management and to promote recycling and sustainable transport systems
- Community Involvement: finding ways to ensure that all sectors of the community feel involved and welcome at the Country Park
- Built Features: auditing the existing buildings and their suitability for their current use. The buildings were built when the Country Park was attracting approximately 25,000 visitors a year. With over 550,000 visitors, these buildings are no longer able to sustain the volume and detract from the visitor experience.
- 3rd Party Interests: assessing the value of external lease arrangements and opportunities for new and innovative private and public partnerships.

4. CONSULTATIONS AND AMENDMENTS

4.1 The main objective of the Management and Development Plan for Dean Castle Country Park is to develop a document detailing a shared vision for the future of

one of Ayrshire's key visitor attractions. This has been achieved through extensive consultation during the following stages:

- Informal consultation with interest groups, landowning and managing groups and the general public. This stage has been carried out on an adhoc basis through strong relationships between staff and regular visitors. This has been built up over many years and regular visitors to the Country Park feel comfortable in making suggestions and comments which are fed back through team meetings and have been integrated into the Plan. Annual visitor surveys are also carried out to feed into this process along with biannual VisitScotland Assessments.
- Production of the Draft Management and Development Plan in May 2011;
- Formal consultation of the Draft Management and Development Plan between the 15th July 2011 and 26th August 2011.

4.2 During the formal consultation 3 drop in sessions were organised within the Dean Castle Country Park Visitor Centre.

4.3 6 representations were received during the formal consultation period. These representations were supportive of the management approach and the vision outlined in the Plan. The representations have not led to any amendments to the draft plan. A summary of the representations is available via the Members' Portal.

5. STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

5.1 The Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan is a land use document that will guide future development and management of the Country Park. Therefore, a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the provisions of the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 was required. As the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan is a qualifying plan or programme, as defined by Section 5(3) of the above Act, it avoided the requirement to undertake screening as defined in Section 9 of the Act. East Ayrshire Council made the determination that the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan required an SEA in February 2011 and complied with the advertisement requirements in Section 10 of the Act.

5.2 The overall purpose of the SEA of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan was to identify, describe and evaluate the likely significant effects, positive or negative, that the plan may have on the environment.

5.3 As required by Act the SEA process had to be fully integrated with the development of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan and both processes were run in parallel and were clearly defined. The Environmental Report was issued for public consultation at the same time as the formal consultation of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan. No public representations were received on the Environmental Report. A copy of the Environmental Report is available via the Members' Portal.

5.4 Section 18(1)(a)(iii) of the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 requires the Council to publish a 'statement' (hereafter referred to as an SEA Statement) to accompanying the adopted Dean Castle Country Park Management and

Development Plan, as soon as reasonably practical after adoption of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan. The contents of the SEA Statement are specified by Section 18(3) of the Act, which are as follows:

- (a) how environmental considerations have been integrated in to the plan or programme;
- (b) how the environmental report has been taken into account;
- (c) how the opinions expressed in response to the invitations mentioned in section 16 have been taken into account;
- (d) how the results of any relevant consultation under regulation 14 of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (S.I. 2004/1633) have been taken into account.
- (e) the reasons for choosing the plan or programme as adopted, in light of the other reasonable alternatives considered; and
- (f) the measures that are to be taken to monitor the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plan or programme.

5.5 The results of the SEA, which are detailed in the Environmental Report, are required to be taken into account when finalising the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan. However, it should be noted that although the environmental assessment must be taken into account when making the decision on the final content of the Plan, the plan does not necessarily need to take on board any of the recommendations that have been made in the Environmental Report or during the consultation process. However, it is vital that the Council show how the Environmental Report and consultation responses have been taken into consideration even if they do not lead to any changes in the plan.

5.6 The Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan SEA Statement outlines the consultation responses and the environmental considerations which have been taken into account during the development of the Finalised Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan. A copy of the SEA Statement is available via the Members' Portal.

6. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FINALISED DEAN CASTLE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN

6.1 The Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan and SEA Statement will be made available for general public reference through www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk and www.deancastle.com

6.2 The management and prescription tables outlined in the appendices of the Plan will be implemented over the 5 year period of the Plan with annual reviews and monitoring of each action.

7. COMMUNITY PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The outcomes of the management and development plan will impact on the Community Plans: Delivering Community Regeneration, Promoting Lifelong Learning and Promoting Health and Wellbeing

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The financial implications arising from the implementation of the plan will be met from departmental budgets and external funding streams.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There will be no personnel implications arising from the implementation of the Management and Development Plan for Dean Castle Country Park.

10. POLICY / LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The implementation of the Management and Development Plan will ensure compliance with the Countryside Scotland Act 1967.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 If Dean Castle Country Park is not managed in a strategic fashion, there may be a risk of degradation of one of South West Scotland's key visitor attractions.

12. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 12.1 There is no direct equality impact issues arising from this report

13. CONCLUSIONS

- 13.1 East Ayrshire Countryside Services has made significant progress in raising the profile of Dean Castle Country Park and other nature based tourism products in East Ayrshire, particularly by ensuring that the Country Park has a significant role in developing the tourism potential of East Ayrshire as well as supporting healthy lifestyles, outdoor learning and environmental regeneration and enhancement.
- 13.2 The Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan will be an important tool in attracting major levels of external funds to meet the shared vision outlined in the Plan.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- (i) Approves the responses to the comments received to the Consultative Draft Environmental Report, which are contained in the SEA Statement;
- (ii) Adopts the finalised Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan and Environmental Report;
- (iii) Approves the SEA Statement and authorise the Head of Leisure Services to undertake the necessary advertisement requirements as specified in the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005;
- (iv) Approves the recommendations for implementation of the Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan; and
- (v) Otherwise notes the content of this report.

Elizabeth Morton
Depute Chief Executive / Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Dean Castle Country Park Management and Development Plan
2. Environmental Report
3. SEA Statement
4. Summary of representations made during the consultation process.

These papers are available via the Members' Portal.

Members requiring further information should contact Anneke Freel, Countryside Development Manager on 01563 554748

Implementation Officer: John Griffiths, Head of Leisure Services