

Agenda Item 25

Cabinet

05 October 2011



Exempt Information

Para 3 Schedule 12A information relating to the finance or business affairs of any particular person

Seaton Regeneration – Visitor Centre

Summary

Following a resolution made by Cabinet on 13 July 2011 to commence the marketing of the Visitor Centre with a view to seeking an operator, authorisation is now sought to use the pre-development budget to facilitate this resolution.

Recommendation

- 1) That a maximum of 50% of the pre-development fund set aside for Visitor Centres in East Devon be made available to spend on a high quality marketing exercise amongst the widest possible range of potential occupiers of the Seaton Visitor Centre.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

The marketing of the Visitor Centre will require the continued use of the pre-development budget as a working fund.

b) Alternative Options

Not commit further expenditure against this budget and continue to hold all work to further the visitor centre scheme.

c) Risk Considerations

There is an expectation from the Council's partners, including the County Council, Seaton Town Council and the Seaton Visitor Centre Trust, that the District is facilitating the continued work on delivering a visitor centre for the town.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

Policy and budgetary considerations are considered within the main body of the report

e) Date for Review of Decision

December 2011

1.0 Seaton Visitor Centre

- 1.1 A detailed update on the Visitor Centre was provided to Cabinet at its meeting held on 13 July 2011 and an extract from that report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 1.2 Since 2005, a pre-development fund has provided the majority of up front project work on the visitor centre scheme. This fund was originally funded by SWRDA in the sum of £100,000 and match funded by East Devon District Council, Devon County Council, Exmouth Town Council, Seaton Town Council and the Environment Agency. Expenditure to date has included the payment of consultants to assist with project development. The District Council's contribution to this fund over this time has totalled £60,000. (This is in addition to other funding and staff resource contributed over the lifetime of the project).
- 1.3 Until recently, the budget was held by Exmouth & Seaton Interpretation Centre Board (E&SIC), but is now held by East Devon District Council.
- 1.4 The E&SIC Board dissolved itself in the Summer of 2010, and authorisation is now sought for the Finance Department to release the funding to continue pre-development work on the scheme.
- 1.5 The remaining balance of the fund is £60,681.44.
- 1.6 It is proposed that expenditure of up to 50% of this budget is used to facilitate the work required to bring the visitor centre opportunity to the market. The marketing exercise needs to be robust and professional to ensure maximum experience amongst a range of potential occupiers.

Legal Implications

Any marketing exercise subject to the recommended funding should be carried out in compliance with the Council's contract standing orders.

Financial Implications

The financial implications are included in the report. The £60,681 is held as part of the General Fund balance.

Appendices Attached

Appendix 1 – Extract from Seaton Regeneration Update Report to Cabinet 13 July 2011 Cabinet

05 October 2011

Donna Best
Principal Estates Surveyor

Appendix 1

Seaton Visitor Centre

Extract from Seaton Regeneration Update report to Cabinet 13 July 2011

“3.0 Seaton Visitor Centre

- 3.1 Members will be aware that the Seaton Visitor Centre project has suffered a number of setbacks since the time the idea was conceived some 10 years ago. Most recently, SWERDA pulled out of a funding commitment of £1.25 million and in November 2009, the project was advised that the £1million bid against CABE's Seachange scheme had failed. In early 2010, the Visitor Centre Project Manager resigned and by the summer, the Exmouth & Seaton Interpretation Centre Board, which had been envisaged as the Visitor Centre operator, was dissolved.
- 3.2 However, the community of Seaton and its partners, have not lost sight of their vision to develop a vision for the town that has natural heritage at its heart, central to which, is the desire to create a permanent centre that celebrates the natural wealth of the area.
- 3.3 Believing that the natural assets of the town hold the key to its regeneration, both the Council and Devon County Council have committed a total of £2.3 million toward the design and construction of the visitor centre. A great deal of progress has been made in the last 12 months: A planning application, based on funding commitments of the Council and Devon County of £2.3 million, was submitted in September 2010 and received a positive response subject to the Planning Authority being satisfied of the building's sustainability credentials. A mechanical and engineering contractor is currently working on this aspect of the building design, with a view to obtaining a BREEAM rating of 'Very Good'. It is due to be constructed through 2011 and 2012, with a 'soft' opening in 2012 prior to being fully open to the public in Spring 2013.
- 3.3 In the meantime, independent advice has been sought on alternative suitable operator models and a Client Advisory Group formed to support the Council in the delivery of the project.
- 3.4 The Client Advisory Group (CAG) consists of a number of partners including representation from the Council's Portfolio Holder Economy Devon County's and the Council's Countryside teams, the Seaton Visitor Centre Trust, the World Heritage Jurassic Coast Team, Consultant advisor Doug Hulyer and building project managers Ward Williams. Working in partnership, the CAG have not only looked at potential operator models over the last 6 months, but have also consolidated the overall vision into one document, the 'Natural Seaton' Concept.
- 3.5 The document introduces the idea that the CAG is an embryonic Natural Seaton Partnership and it is proposed that this Partnership might be formalised at some stage in the future to take forward the vision.
- 3.6 The CAG has agreed a schedule of operator requirements for the Centre. A copy is attached at Appendix 1 of the Natural Seaton document. Members will note that the expectation is that the visitor centre will require no revenue subsidy. The Council has of course already agreed a funding commitment of £1.83 million, donation of land to the scheme, and significant staffing and revenue resource to work towards project delivery.

- 3.7 The requirements from a potential operator are essentially based on the provision of an interpretative exhibition experience telling the Natural Seaton stories and encouraging further exploration into the 'Hot Spots' – the Axe Estuary, Axmouth harbour, The Undercliffs, the Nature Reserve, Seaton Hole and the Seafront. In addition, the physical needs of the visitor will need to be well catered in the form of adequate rest areas, toilet provision and such like. Wherever possible the catering and retail operation, whilst being of top quality, should also support the main storyline with ethical, compatible and relevant offers.
- 3.8 The visitor centre is being built to a fixed budget that will deliver the base build, all mechanical and electrical and other essential services, flooring fitted toilet/washroom facilities, the interpretative exhibits, counter/entry desk/TIC area. The operator will be expected to supply all catering and retail fit-out, officer furniture, tills etc.
- 3.9 It is proposed that authorisation from Members is given to the Principal Estates Surveyor to now commence the marketing of the opportunity to run the centre and seek expressions of interest. Interest will be welcomed from potential operators whether they run on no-for-profit, for-profit or hybrid models. Final selection of the preferred operator and the associated business model is then expected to be made in October 2011.
- 3.10 In the meantime, work will progress through the summer to produce an interpretation plan that details the whole of the Natural Seaton offer. This will include the detailed exhibition and activity plans for the centre, as well as outline plans for the associated 'hot spots'. These will need to include input from a preferred operator once identified. Once this work is further on, the design for the building cannot be finalised.
- 3.11 Key to the success of the project is ensuring that the linkages between the Nature Reserve, Play area, Car Park, Visitor Centre, Tram Terminus, Seafront and the Town, all form part of one coherent strategy. As such, Graham Lobb Architects have been asked to work with all the stakeholders to bring all plans for the land at the Underfleet, into one masterplan."