

COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

Item under consideration: Support for National Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Celebrations

Date considered: 14 November 2012

The Communities Select Committee held a Call In Meeting to review Surrey County Council's Cabinet decision of 23 October in relation to support for the National Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Celebration.

The members of the Select Committee support and endorse all of the recommendations in the model resolutions 1-20 , which includes the proposal for a National Holiday on 15 June 2015 to celebrate the 800th anniversary. The Call In related to the £5,000,000 contribution to the funding for a new visitor centre. The full details of the Call In are set out below.

Reason for the Call In

The Communities Select Committee views with concern the decision of the Cabinet to make a contribution of £5,000,000 towards the funding of a new visitor centre in Runnymede in connection with the 800th Magna Carta anniversary celebrations. It asks the Cabinet to review its decision with a view to supporting these celebrations in a way that involves a very significantly reduced financial contribution from the County Council.

The Committee asks the Cabinet to take particular account of the following points in reviewing its decision : -

1. In difficult financial circumstances, with many County Council services under strain £5,000,000 (which represents nearly 1% of our annual Council tax yield) is perhaps better spent on other key Council services.
2. Whatever benefits may accrue from this development will principally benefit the Borough of Runnymede yet the Borough Council is making no direct financial contribution towards the estimated £8,000,000 costs. This might reasonably be considered to be unbalanced by the many Council Tax payers in other parts of Surrey who will bear most of the costs.
3. Many of the financial arguments advanced in favour of the development seem to be based on untested and potentially optimistic assumptions about tourism numbers and employment. It is of concern that no detailed business case or environmental impact assessment have been prepared or considered by Cabinet before this decision was taken. Consideration should be given to asking the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake an investigation of the financial assumptions underlying this proposal before approval of any County Council funds is given.
4. There is little clarity about exactly how the £8,000,000 figure has been arrived at and exactly what the County Council would be getting for its investment.

The report also refers to the need for 'requisite local improvements to the highways'. It is unclear if this expenditure is in addition to the £8,000,000 project cost. It is also unclear if it is a reference to fairly minor local highways expenditure or major roundabout works ,costing several £million, which it has been argued would be necessary if the Visitor Centre project went ahead. There is a need for transparency on this point so that any impacts on the County's overall highways budgets and priorities can be assessed.

5. There does not seem to have been proper consideration given to other alternative proposals which would be less costly and potentially more appropriate in celebrating the 800th Anniversary celebrations. (Details of some of these are included in the written representations made to the Select Committee which are included in the background papers) Attention is also drawn to the fact that this project was rejected for funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund as it was considered 'not a strong match' against the necessary criteria of conservation, learning, participation benefits, need and value for money. It is suggested that the Cabinet should seek further information on this assessment as part of its own reconsideration of support for the project.
6. Representations made to the Select Committee suggest very limited consultation with local people and growing opposition to the proposal (on grounds of cost, feasibility and loss of a valued local open space) now that it is clear that the Visitor Centre proposal involves somewhat more than the 'minimal public funding' it was stated would be used in the Borough Council 2012 questionnaire.
7. Runnymede has accepted that there are significant risks in completing this project in accordance with the compressed timescale for the building. There are also potentially linked problems and challenges in connection with use of open space and the common land running along side the site which present further risks. The Cabinet should seek legal and other appropriate officer advice on these matters so that any risks can be properly calculated and the Cabinet can satisfy itself that investment of such a significant sum of public money is appropriate.

STEVE COSSER

Chairman of the Communities Committee