

CABINET – 27 NOVEMBER 2012

CABINET MEMBER COMMUNITY SERVICES AND 2012 GAMES RESPONSE REGARDING THE COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE CALL-IN AND THE PROPOSED MAGNA CARTA VISITOR CENTRE.

I have taken on board the points raised by the Communities Select Committee and would remind Cabinet colleagues that our report to Cabinet on 23 October 2012 very clearly stated that our support for the proposed visitor centre was "in principle" to investing £5 million in the project.

As this is public money, we are taking steps to ensure that the residents of Surrey obtain value for money from this potential investment. Further consideration of many aspects of detail will need to be made before a final commitment is given. This due diligence is currently being undertaken. This is a highly responsible and appropriate course of action. My officers are currently reviewing the Business Case, Risk Management and all matters pertinent to the proposed visitor centre, and its development and its future operational sustainability: the extent of community support/engagement for the project.

While SCC is looking into these matters, Runnymede BC are looking into one of SCC's key conditions - the raising of the balance of the funds necessary - £3 million - from other sources....as the SCC offer was conditional on a match of £3 million to complete the scheme and allow it to proceed.

When the Barons and King John met in Runnymede to seal the Magna Carta in 1215, even they could not have predicted the significance that it would still play eight centuries later. It is a document of fundamental historical importance not just in Surrey, where it came into being, but for the free world. The Magna Carta is a cornerstone upon which modern democracies are built, and we in Surrey should be tremendously proud of our heritage. To this day, The Magna Carta is taught as a fundamental principle of freedom in American schools.

For a number of years there has been some concern at the quality of the visitor experience at this historically important site in Runnymede. One of the key ambitions for the 2015 anniversary (at both local and national level) is to provide new visitor facilities and arrangements (and improved site presentation/interpretation arrangements) at a standard consistent with the significance of the site. The Runnymede vision is for a visitor centre as an appropriate way of marking the immense historical significance of the site. I am passionate that everyone in Surrey, especially our young people should reconnect with this important part of their heritage. My worry is that the Magna Carta's relevance is being lost in the country of its birth.

The Runnymede Borough vision is bold and ambitious and Surrey County Council should provide strategic leadership to assist with this ambition. We have always been clear that there was a need for improved understanding of the Magna Carta. Surrey's vision is for a state of the art facility within an architecturally distinguished landmark building, with impressive sustainability credentials that will tell the story of the Magna to both local and international visitors. This will ensure that the history of one of mankind's most important defining moments is preserved for future generations to understand it better.

In response to some of the specific points raised by the Select Committee I must confirm that the proposed contribution to this project is from capital - not revenue.

Whilst the Magna Carta celebrations will have a focus on Runnymede we believe that, like 2012 Olympics cycle event, it will be a matter of pride to all Surrey residents to be closely associated with this national, indeed international occasion.

Runnymede BC have estimated project costs at £8 million - in summary this comprises:

£4.5 million build costs
£1 million professional fees
£1 million international provision

With the balance of £1.5m on marketing promotion, community engagement programmes and contingency.

Although the resources of Runnymede B.C do not allow it to invest a capital sum in the project, they have commendably grappled with major a international celebration, expended a great deal of resource in feasibility and preparatory work in order to develop their proposals thus far.

The Runnymede Roundabout is one of the most congested traffic hot spots in the county and has been identified as an essential priority for the county. This scheme is already included in our current plans for major highways projects, subject to agreement to its priority in a separate paper to this Cabinet meeting. Any requirement for other minor local highway improvements arising as a consequence of this project would be identified and assessed as part of the planning process for the centre. The highways costs are currently excluded from the £8million but the relevant costs will be identified as part of the planning process and the outcome of the work of a traffic and transport consultant.

Building a Magna Carta visitor centre ready for 2015 will help raise the profile of Surrey, and reinforce the important role that the county played 800 years ago. I would like a building and a visitor experience that welcomes visitors from around the world to come and learn about this historic document, and recognise that Surrey is its birthplace. 2015 will see the opening not just of the visitor centre, but also we will be encouraging a range of celebrations to mark this incredibly significant event.

Because of the critical deadline of the 2015 anniversary, we aim to have completed our evaluation of the project by the end of the year. The scheme will still be subject to the usual planning application procedures. I will be scrutinising the project every step of the way, ensuring there are proper governance structures in place. County Councillors, advisers and officers will be working together to ensure that if we go ahead with this project it is delivered successfully and that any money we finally commit to spend is spent wisely.

Helyn Clack
Cabinet Member for Community Services and the 2012 Games
27 November 2012