

Ninesprings Café, Education and Information Centre

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Purpose of the Report

This report highlights the key elements of the project to deliver the multi-purpose café, education and information centre at Ninesprings, Yeovil. It seeks to provide an opportunity for members to review the approach and identify areas of practice to be considered for future projects.

Forward Plan

This report has been part of the forward plan.

Public Interest

The Council initiated a project in 2009 to establish a multi-purpose centre to support the extensive use of the Council's 127 acre Green Flag award winning Yeovil Country Park on the southern and eastern edges of Yeovil.

The new Ninesprings Café, Education and Information Centre comprising a café, public toilets, a meeting point and information point, volunteer space, and a small staff area and workshop opened in October 2014. The Centre has been funded through a package of grants and SSDC capital finance.

In delivering capital projects of this nature it is important to take the opportunity to review and learn from the approaches deployed in their execution. This report provides an opportunity for members of the Scrutiny Committee to do this.

Actions Required

It is recommended that Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report and highlight areas of practice to be considered as part of future projects.

Background

The Ninesprings Café, Education and Information Centre project was initiated in 2009 to address concerns arising from user consultation exercises highlighting the lack of facilities available for visitors, staff and volunteers at Yeovil Country Park. This report highlights the key elements of the project.

Summary of Project Stages

The overall delivery of this project has consisted of nine key stages:

- Stage 1 – Project Initiation
- Stage 2 – Feasibility
- Stage 3 – Yeovil Vision Capital Bid
- Stage 4 – Planning Permission
- Stage 5 – Capital Fund Raising
- Stage 6 – Value Engineering / Design Refinement
- Stage 7 – Contractor Procurement
- Stage 8 – Contract and Construction
- Stage 9 – Operation Preparation
- Stage 10 – Handover and Operation

This phased approach to delivery enables the Council to proactively manage project risk.

Stage 1 - Project Initiation

This project was initiated in 2009 to create a new Visitor Centre and Ranger Base at Yeovil Country Park and establish a 'Countryside Ranger' position to implement a full programme of activities for visitors of the park.

At the time it was seeking to address concerns emerging from user consultation exercises highlighting the lack of facilities available for visitors, staff and volunteers at Yeovil Country Park. These exercises were led by the ranger team and conducted on a face to face basis in Yeovil Town Centre and Yeovil Country Park events between 2005 and 2009. It is important to highlight that the call for improved facilities escalated significantly after the development of the new Visitor and Education Centre at the Ham Hill Country Park in 2006.

Using the findings emerging from the consultation exercises the ranger team identified that a multi-purpose centre for Yeovil Country Park would need to contain:

- Public WC facilities.
- Meeting Room and entrance way, primarily intended as educational facilities and for use during public events held at the Country Park.
- Workshop and building service areas.
- Tea room and refreshment serving area, kitchen area and external over-spill area to serve the public.
- Rangers office, small kitchen area and washing facilities.
- External pathways and access points.

At the same time they set out six main project objectives:

1. The development of new facilities (Ranger Base and Visitor Centre) at Yeovil Country Park.
2. Appointing a Grant-funded Community Officer for a fixed term period of 4 years.
3. Creating additional visitors (schools, students, informal education and events) to the park.
4. Increasing the number of volunteering opportunities at the park.
5. Increasing formal training opportunities.
6. Generating a small but dependable income stream.

Stage 2 - Feasibility and Stage 3 – Yeovil Vision Capital Bid

A feasibility study was undertaken by the Countryside Service and the Yeovil Vision Management Team in 2009.

SSDC Architect Nicola Drew worked in conjunction with the Countryside Rangers and other SSDC Officers to design the detailed scheme. As part of this process advice was also sought from other countryside professionals at local sites including the National Trust, RSPB and Jurassic Coast, plus from our Lottery advisor.

After consideration of all potential site options, the building was purpose designed for its setting and sought to incorporate a number of sustainable technologies including an air source heat pump, under floor heating, FSC approved timber, energy and water saving technology, high level wall insulation, triple glazing, low lighting and PIR sensors, foundations made from recycled crushed concrete and walls made of recycled hemp block construction.

After completion of the design process, capital cost and revenue estimates were prepared, with the feasibility study identifying two elements – the first a capital project of £353K for the centre with on-going annual premises costs amounting to £14,000, and the second a revenue project of £201K to appoint a Countryside Ranger for four years.

Importantly, the framing of the feasibility study was influenced strongly from early conversations and indications of support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). As a result the feasibility study anticipated that a HLF lottery grant of £483,600 would be secured to enable both elements of the project to be delivered.

The design and feasibility study was considered and approved by the Yeovil Vision Project Board in 2009 and the SSDC District Executive in early 2010.

Stage 4 – Planning Permission

The Planning Application submission was prepared in house by Engineering and Property Services having sought pre-advice from the Development Control Service. As an internal application it was considered by the Area South Committee and the Regulation Committee. Planning consent was granted in 2010 and subsequently renewed in July 2013.

Whilst the application received a small number of objections from adjoining neighbours in 2010, the application received significant support from the Friends of Yeovil Country Park, volunteers and users of the park.

Building this support is essential to these types of projects, and in this case the time spent by the ranger team in consulting, updating and involving users in the project was central to making an effective and reasoned case at both Committees, and planning consent being granted in 2010.

Stage 5 – Capital Fund Raising

Arguably the biggest setback in realizing this project arose in late 2010 as the HLF announced changes to their grant funding programmes, setting out that they would no longer be supporting capital applications to support the development of visitor centres. Their focus would shift towards revenue applications to support the development and management of existing greenspaces, and projects seeking to deliver a wide range of activities designed to improve access in ways which are complimentary to those greenspaces. In our case, this meant the Council could now only submit a revenue based application for the second element of the project.

In moving forward the ranger team formed the Friends of Yeovil Country Park community group to assist in fundraising for the centre and other country park projects.

The group conducted a desktop exercise identifying alternative prospective grants, national and local business funds. With a core of 10 members, the group met approximately every month and throughout 2012 and 2013 approached / submitted funding applications to 113 national and local businesses and grant funding bodies in fundraising for the Centre. Ultimately it was this collaboration that secured the finance for the centre.

As part of the desktop exercise, landfill tax grants schemes were identified as a key funding opportunity. In a project of this scale, it is vital to secure at least one major grant offer to enable the project to be realized and in particular to give confidence to smaller grant funders that the project is deliverable. Having researched the potential landfill options, the group made an initial inquiry to the Veolia Environmental Trust in Dec 2012 which successfully past round 1 in May 2013, resulting in the Council being invited to prepare a detailed submission and presentation to the South West Board in August 2013. Following South West Board approval, the Council was offered an in-principle grant of £90,000 towards the project, subject to the Council securing the remaining capital funding required for the build by the 20th January 2014.

The Countryside Service submitted a variety of bids, the successful ones are listed in the table below:

Funder	Amount confirmed
SSDC via Yeovil Vision	£50,000
Agusta Westland	£5,000
Yeovil Town Council	£5,000
The Veolia Environmental Trust	£90,000
Unilateral Agreement	£39,229
Friends of Yeovil Country Park	£4,000
J H Meech and Son	£25
Old Mill Accountancy	£250
Abbey Manor Charitable Trust	£500
Countryside Staff Member Sponsorship	£236
Waitrose Community Fund	£102
Individual public donations	£510
Clarks Trust	£10,000

Wessex Watermark Award	£1,500
EDF Green Energies	£8,245
Well Being of Yeovil Association	£8,000
SSDC Countryside	£3,000
SSDC District Executive Underwrite	£75,000
TOTAL CONFIRMED	£300,597

In terms of the overall capital funding raised for the project, the percentage of external funds raised amounted to 57% (£172,597), with the remaining 43% (£128,000) of funding provided by the Council.

The key to successfully raising the £172,597 of external finance for the building is down to its manageable scale, multi-purpose use, focus on volunteers and supporting their roles in the wider country park and provision of basic facilities for the public to enhance their country park visit. The support and dedicated work of the Friends of Yeovil Country Park throughout this whole process has ensured the success of this project; from their support at planning committees, to pitches and approaches to local funders, and their overall drive to see the project come to fruition.

Many approaches were unsuccessful including bids made to Tesco, Screwfix Foundation, Yarlington Homes, The NatureSave Trust, Battens, The Big Lottery Fund and Biffa Awards. Despite this a number of positive community links were created with local businesses, for example, Crofton Stores now twice a year supply 800 chocolate bars for children's events in the park, Asda's Community Champion attends and assists at events, and various other companies have committed vouchers and prizes for raffles and events. More recently the Friends of Yeovil Country Park secured a further £25,000 in grant money (from the Ernest Cook Trust, Grants for the Arts and Awards for All) to enable the delivery of a range of events from the new Centre over the next 3 years.

Stage 6 - Value Engineering / Design Refinement

Following receipt of the Veolia Environmental Trust grant offer, the project team re-assessed and reduced the capital budget for the project down from the original estimated £353,000 to £290,000 excluding VAT.

In order to achieve this, the project team reviewed the design and undertook a value engineering exercise together with an external Quantity Surveyor and the Development Control to bring the project within budget.

From a design perspective the key change concerned the re-working of the internal spaces to incorporate the café facility to provide a meeting point and generate future income streams for the park, removing the outdated tea room and building upon the learning from the Ham Hill Centre.

Some examples of changes made through this process included the foundation design being altered based on detailed Geo-Technical Soil and Ground Investigation assessments. Mechanical and electrical provisions were specified through further detailed design. Walls were changed to standard cavity concrete block with full fill insulation. Minor adjustments were made to window locations and triple glazing proposals were dropped. Eight sunpipes were installed to increase natural daylight in the building and therefore reduce requirement for artificial lighting.

Stage 7 – Contractor Procurement

The procurement strategy comprised of appointing a principal contractor to deliver the building, and a separate specialist contractor to fit out the café.

The preparation of the tender documentation and management of the tender process was undertaken in-house by the Engineering and Property Service.

The principal contractor tendering process was conducted throughout December 2013. Five contractors returned tenders by on Tuesday 7th January 2014.

Following an analysis of the tenders and tenderers, the preferred contractor submission from Melhuish and Saunders amounted to £300,000, after consideration of identified reductions amounting to £57,000. The sum included a £10,000 provision for contingency. This represented the lowest cost submission after removal / re-specification of a small number of items designed to achieve better value.

Stage 8 – Contract and Construction

Ahead of executing the contract the project team worked with each grant provider to discharge the associated terms and conditions in order to enable the Council to commence works.

As part of this process, an issue arose with Veolia in that whilst the Council had secured the remaining capital funding required, Veolia were concerned that the Council had not been able to agree the contract reductions with the preferred tenderer by the 20th January deadline. As the reductions totalled £57,000, Veolia sought an additional assurance that the Council would agree to finance this sum in the event that Melhuish and Saunders would not reduce the contract price. Timescales dictated that an urgent executive decision be taken. It was a relatively low risk as Officers would not have proceeded with the contract unless the contract reductions were agreed.

Contract reductions were subsequently agreed in April 2014, enabling contracts to be finalised and construction to commence on site in May 2014.

Building work ran to schedule and reached practical completion on by Friday 24th October.

The provisional final figure submitted by principal contractor Melhuish and Saunders currently amounts to £280,876. This takes into account issues raised during the snagging period October 2014 – March 2015 and is expected to be finalised and closed shortly.

Based on this provisional final figure of £280,876 the actual spend against the two underwrite provisions provided by the District Executive can be summarised for the avoidance of doubt as follows:

Underwrite Provision	Anticipated Spend
January 2014 – Up to £75,000	£55,279
February 2014 - £57,000	£0

Subject to final financial contract closure, this means that 61% (£172,597) was raised externally and 39% (£108,279) of funding was provided by the Council.

Stage 9 – Operational Preparation

In order to optimize the café potential for the centre, the project team benefited substantially through an existing contact from the Family Focus Programme who had previously been the Business Development Director for Costa Coffee. This input enabled the project to adopt a national chain commercial approach and 'piggy back' upon a range of national supplier arrangements to both deliver better value for money and fast track implementation.

The range of preparatory activity covered during the 5 month period ahead of the planned opening date comprised:

- Café operating option appraisal
- Market analysis
- Product plan, pricing and profit margins
- Trade projections
- Business planning
- Café layout and equipment specification
- Café fit out procurement
- BT Openreach Communication line provision
- Staff resourcing and recruitment strategy
- Café Manager recruitment
- Coffee tasting, sourcing and supply contract
- Branding
- Crockery and small ware sourcing
- Supplier sourcing
- Tills and Streamline provision
- Assistant Café Manager and Barista recruitment
- Operational risk assessments
- Operational standards
- Till installation and configuration
- Staff training
- Food hygiene rating scheme preparation
- Wifi
- Opening

Operationally one of the critical success factors concerned the appointment of the Manager to the lead the Café. The project team was particularly pleased to attract Samantha Lane with extensive national coffee chain management experience to the role. Samantha has made an outstanding contribution to the Ninesprings operation since she began her employment with the Council in September 2014.

Stage 10 – Handover and Operation

Practical completion was reached as planned on 24th October 2014. Over the weekend of 25th and 26th October the rangers and new café team moved into the Centre, with the building and cafe formally opening on Tuesday 28th October, half term week. The Ranger team organised a celebratory Halloween event on the Friday 31st October to coincide with the Centre opening.

Operationally the centre has created employment equivalent to 4.5 full time staff.

The Café has been developed to be an open and bright space. It welcomes children, provides free wildlife themed activities and crucially for its location it welcomes well behaved dogs. There is space for pushchairs and wheelchairs to move around freely, and there has been a steady increase in the use by groups like child-minders. The recent arrival of WiFi has improved the business use for small meetings and people working remotely.

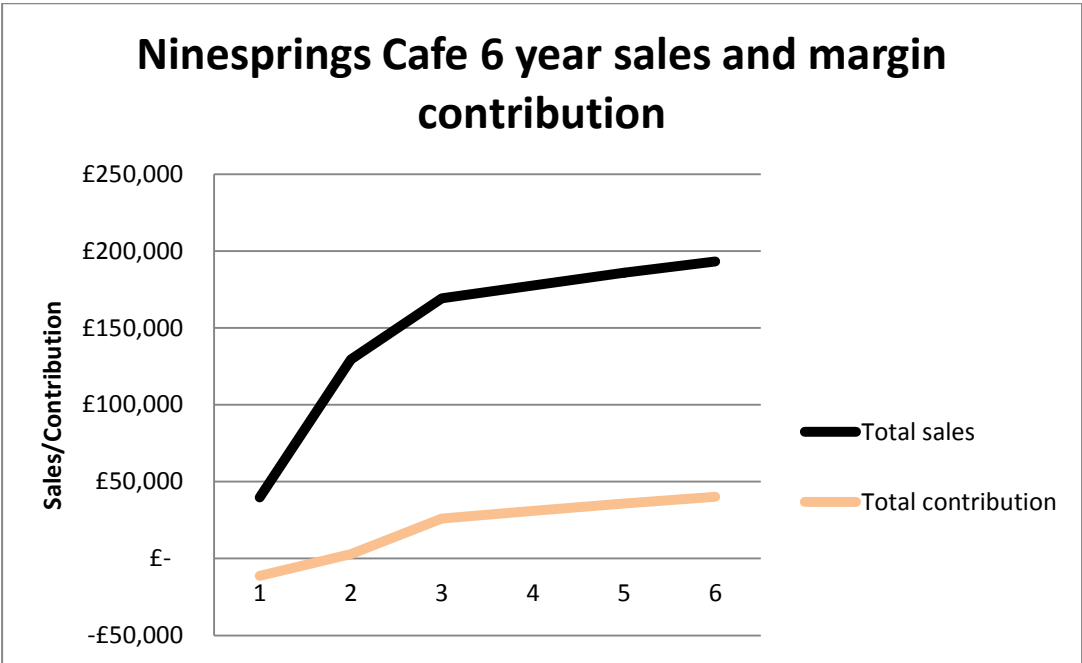
Within two weeks of opening the Café received its five star food hygiene rating.

The café team has just started a feedback exercise, as the business enters its fifth month of trading, to ask for comments on all aspects of the Café. There is also a very active Facebook page for the café (“Ninesprings Café”) where all offers and activities are posted.

The countryside ranger team and volunteers are very happily sharing the building with our new café team and are actively searching out ways to increase footfall to support its success. The most recent success was the free dog micro chipping events delivered by the Dog’s Trust.

The Café is currently outperforming its business plan. To date turnover is nearly double that anticipated through the business plan. For example February 2015 was profiled at £7,688 and takings were £14,611. The Café Manager and Countryside Manager are working together to continue the café success and countryside events and activities are carefully profiled to work alongside the café.

The forward sales and margin projections for the café are summarised in the chart below.



As we enter the Spring the ranger team will be finalising the landscaping outside the center and creating a new outside seating area and bike locking facilities will be added to the area immediately around the building.

Heritage Lottery Fund Submission

The Countryside Service has been working to submit a bid to the HLF to help in the development and management of the wider greenspace of the country park. Initially it was hoped that they would help towards the cost of the construction of the new Centre, however the projects development led us to submit a £440,000 bid to the lottery in mid February 2015 that aims to deliver a wide range of activities complimentary to the new Centre. One of the Lottery's conditions of our round 2 submission was completion of the new Centre.

After a round 1 submission at the end of 2013 a development grant of £35,000 was approved and from May 2014 – January 2015 a project officer was employed. The post researched and consulted upon a range of activities that have been proposed to the lottery as part of our round 2 submission. Throughout the posts duration public responses totalled 1500 and included schools, groups, representatives and individuals.

The Lottery project proposes:

- Employment of 3 year community ranger to coordinate activities and deliver new work programmes.
- Enhanced volunteering opportunities for a greater diversity of individuals and groups.
- New and better interpretation, and educational, materials both inside and outside the Centre and across the Country Park.
- Built repairs to Ninesprings, where the ageing infrastructure in the waterfalls and grottos needs specialist attention.
- Habitat improvement and enhancement works across the park for meadows, wetlands and woodlands.
- A huge variety of events based in the country park but of interest to a great array of people including art sessions, adventurous activities and performances.

The outcome of this submission will be learnt in June.

Corporate Implications

Corporate Priorities

The Ninesprings Café, Education and Information Centre helps contribute towards two SSDC Corporate Priorities:

- a. Focus Two - Environment: Maintain our Country Parks
- b. Focus Four - Health and Communities: Maintain and enhance the South Somerset network of leisure and cultural facilities.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change

Throughout the development of the project full consideration was given to the environmental credentials of the building, ensuring it demonstrated good practice as the building sits within a high quality green space. The building has been constructed of masonry blockwork with minimum recycled content of 50%. The heating is provided (very effectively) via an air source heat pump conducted via under floor heating. Water and energy saving technology have been installed throughout the building in staff, volunteer and public facilities; grant funding has been specifically sought for rain water harvesting to service the public conveniences and sun pipes have been included to reduce energy consumption. The building is largely timber

clad to ensure it fits with the surrounding environment and the timber is all FSC certified in line with the SSDC Timber Policy. The successful building contractor has been obliged to adhere to SSDC Policies concerning responsible and sustainable sourcing of all construction materials. The building has been sited immediately adjacent to an existing car park so the additional area of hard landscaping is minimal. Any extra surfacing is used by pedestrians only, and is of cobbled style sett paving construction. By limiting hard landscaping we have ensured extra surface water run-off is kept to a minimum. A native planting scheme is taking shape around the buildings perimeter, plants have been donated by Homebase and are good for insects, specifically butterflies and bees and also appropriate for the Country Park and its wildlife. Native wildflower meadow mix is to be sown on the remaining disturbed soil and banks around the centre.

Equality and Diversity Implications

This proposed building comes out of many years of research into use of the Country Park and input from groups and individuals who are currently excluded from use of the green space due to a lack of basic facilities. Already we are seeing a wider range of groups accessing and using the Country Park as they have a free to enter, safe and warm base with access to toilets and a café to support their visit. There is some visitor information already provided at the centre and Café staff are able to assist anyone with particular access requirements. Disability awareness training for all café staff will be delivered over the coming months. It is hoped that in 2016 all the visitor information will be vastly improved with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Volunteering has now been expanded to include a Monday afternoon session for those that are less fit or cannot manage an entire day. This is proving successful and further opportunities can be developed from here for more marginalised or minority groups like the Polish community. Lufton College have assisted in fundraising for this project as they foresee greater opportunities for their students in practical volunteering and assisting in opening of the visitor space at the new building. It is likely that new sessions will include women only sessions, training for young people in outdoor skills and volunteering for those with a range of disabilities. With the provision of a building the ranger team will also be able to manage the loan of a new disabled tramper vehicle as part of the Heritage Lottery project to help individuals explore Ninesprings and the wider Country Park. A hearing loop is due to be installed on the Café bar and the Café Manager continues to work with the South Somerset Disability Forum to resolve snagging issues with the building.

Background Information

Background Papers: District Executive – 9th January 2014
Yeovil Country Park Education Centre and Ranger Base Project
