



Belfast City Council

Report to: Parks and Leisure Committee

Subject: **Watch This Space Project**

Date: 15th October, 2009

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Contact Officer: Robert Scott, Conservation and Promotion Manager

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to consider the Council's continued support for the partnership arrangement with the Ulster Wildlife Trust in respect of the Watch This Space programme.

Relevant Background Information

The Committee is reminded that the former Parks and Cemeteries Sub-Committee agreed in January 2007 to fund a pilot project with the Ulster Wildlife Trust for one year. Through the project the Trust would provide a range of educational activities within Woodvale and Falls Parks. The main purpose of this partnership project, entitled 'Watch This Space', was:

- to encourage greater use of and involvement in local parks by children, and
- to develop their understanding of parks and the importance and relevance of the natural environment to their lives.

Specifically the project was intended to deliver crucial parts of the Open Spaces Strategy and Local Biodiversity Action Plan, in particular:

- to increase the appreciation and knowledge of the heritage value of parks, in particular the biodiversity and priority species identified in the council's local biodiversity action plan;
- to provide through partnership working an educational outreach programme in parks;
- to increase use of parks; and
- to promote the value of parks as healthy, safe places,

The pilot project began around May 2007 and ran through to June 2008.

At its meeting in May 2008 the Committee reviewed progress and agreed to its continuation for a further two years, and to extend it to include additional parks

in North and West Belfast and to include the East of the city. This work, which complements the on-going work of the Parks' Outreach officers, has been continuing since May 2008.

The Committee received a further report in June 2009 updating Members on progress in 2008/09 which highlighted that set targets had been achieved and indeed exceeded. The Committee also agreed targets for the current year 2009/10.

Copies of the previous minutes are appended for the convenience of Members of the Committee.

Current context

The main achievements of the Watch This Space project can be summarized as follows:

1. An environmental education outreach programme in 11 different parks in the North, West and East of the city. In partnership with the Ulster Wildlife Trust we have worked with over 600 local schoolchildren each year from 18 different primary schools and 3 secondary schools – engaging each child in the project on five occasions through park visits and pre/post visit classroom activities;
2. A programme of monthly Saturday clubs in Falls, Woodvale and Victoria Parks, delivering environmental activities for 5-11 year olds and parents.
3. We have established contact with local youth groups, organisations and summer schemes to initiate a programme of appropriate park-based activities.
4. Delivery of a programme of environmental activities for 5-12 year olds at each of 15 summer fun days organised by Belfast Parks section.
5. Production of a comprehensive set of teacher/pupil worksheets and information sheets to be available on the council's web site for teachers and schools using parks for outdoor learning activities – all linked to the new curriculum 'Education for Sustainable Development'

Further details are included in Appendix 1, which sets out in greater detail the achievements for 2008/09 and the target for the current year 2009/2010.

Key Issues

The key issue for the Committee to consider is whether to continue to support this community based, educational outreach focused programme within our parks.

The achievements outlined above are significant. It is important that a community understands and appreciates the natural environment around it. Education and promotion is one way in which the council can contribute to this.

It is the view of officers that the project has been successful and met the objectives set out in 2007. Through the project we have been able to deliver

elements of the Open Space Strategy and the Local Biodiversity Action Plan, within the sections on heritage, partnership working, people and community involvement, and education.

The project took time to establish itself but there is a growing sense of ownership within the young members of the communities involved, and the project has been welcomed by local people and teachers.

The risk is that should the project cease it is unlikely that any other organisation will fund a similar project in these communities where open space is largely owned by the Council.

It is recognised that the continuation of the scheme would have revenue implications at a time of financial constraint. To assist Members in making a decision as to the continuation of the scheme a number of options are set out below. There are four possible options, each has been worked up and costed. The pros and cons of each are examined as outlined below.

Options

Option 1 Continue the Watch This Space project in its current format for another year until June 2011.

Pros

- There will be opportunity to build on the good work of the last 3-4 years with schools and local communities.
- Continued educational outreach work, school visits to local parks, Saturday clubs as per existing programme.
- Another year of P5 pupils will have the opportunity to learn about value of parks.
- There will be opportunity to build on initial contacts made with youth groups and secondary schools.
- Development of further resources.
- Environmental education element included in Belfast Parks Summer fun days during 2010
- Continued positive public relations for Parks
- Opportunity to further develop teacher training element

Cons

- Financial commitment c£65k.

Option 2 To withdraw the Watch This Space project from June 2010

Pros

- Financial saving of £65k – no further cost.

Cons

- Break in relationship with schools and local community built up over last 3-4 years.
- Saturday clubs would probably not continue, as local parents not ready to take these over.

- Initial contacts with youth and secondary schools not followed up.
- No further resources developed.
- No environmental education element to events such as Summer Fun Days.

Option 3 To cease Watch This Space partnership and employ an officer to develop educational outreach work.

Pros

- Increase capacity of Council staff to provide service.
- Provide possible closer links with Parks' Outreach Officers. Watch This Space officer could be a 3rd Outreach Officer.
- Saving of £30k on this year's provision.

Cons

- Cost in region of £30-35k
- Reduced capacity to deliver full programme previously delivered by UWT in Watch This Space programme.
- Need to rebuild relationships with schools etc.
- Saturday clubs may require overtime working.
- No access to UWT environmental guide staff for additional help and back up with school groups, tours, clubs, events.
- No additional PR for scheme from partner UWT, who advertise Watch This Space at other opportunities.

Option 4 To continue Watch This Space project in partnership with Ulster Wildlife Trust, but at a reduced level: i.e. reducing UWT staff from 1 full time and 1 part time officer to 1 officer equivalent, and using UWT guides to supplement workload.

Pros

- Continuity of links made with schools and other groups
- UWT guides available for use as back up and assistance
- Opportunity to further pursue engagement with youth/community groups and therefore widen the target audience/age groups.
- Continued positive public relations for Parks.
- Opportunity to further develop teacher training element.
- Saving of £12k on this year's provision.

Cons

- Financial cost c£48k
- Reduced capability to work with schools, which would mean fewer classes or visits organised.
- Saturday clubs may have to be reduced from monthly to every other month.
- Aims of the project delivered but at a reduced cost to the council.

Resource Implications

Financial

Only Option 2 has no financial implications for the Council. The implications will depend on the preferred option. Should Members accede to the recommended option 4, the implications would be in the region of £48k. This has been included in the 2010/11 draft estimates, officers will continue to explore with the Ulster Wildlife Trust possible external funding opportunities to offset the costs of the programme.

Human Resources

There are no additional human resource implications for options 1, 2 and 4, the scheme will continue to be managed by the Conservation and Promotion Manager. Option 3 includes employing an additional outreach officer.

Asset and Other Implications

The programme continues to significantly improve the profile of the parks and will enhance the local value of the assets. It will support the physical elements of parks management in both sites.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

- adopt Option 4 as outlined above to continue the Watch this Space project with the Ulster Wildlife Trust, but at a reduced level.
- agree to a further review in a year's time to assess how the project is working at a reduced level.

Decision Tracking

Officer responsible – Conservation and Promotion Manager.
All actions to be completed by end October 2010.

Key to Abbreviations

UWT – Ulster Wildlife Trust

Documents Attached

None

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