

Milton Country Park: Executive Summary

The Summary Paper provides a case review of Milton Country Park (MCP) for comparative purposes with Hinchingsbrooke Country Park (HCP). MCP extends to approximately 95 acres and the site comprises three main character areas with woodland and grassy meadows alongside the main waterbodies which cover more than one third of the area of the park. The main visitor experience is based around a café, play (new), lakes / landscape and a small-scale watersports offer (sessions are pre-booked and supporting facilities are limited). The park represents a valuable and sizeable greenspace albeit with a limited range of facilities. There is no Green Flag status for the park and it does not have a management plan. Its primary focus is on recreation but with low levels of site management and upkeep.

The physical assets

- MCP is smaller in acreage than HCP and a considerable area is taken up by water
- Its access point and main carpark is closer to the main waterbodies. The visitor centre also enjoys a lakeside position
- The sense of arrival / first impression similar to HCP faces a number of challenges e.g. urban edge site in close proximity to residential and other commercial areas
- HCP has more extensive facilities for staff and volunteers reflecting a higher volume of activity
- Milton presents a limited range of pre-booked watersports opportunities for visitors with no indoor service areas. Currently, watersport activities do not appear to be a key focus of the Trust
- Water access is closer to the main carpark arrival point at Milton which presents a greater opportunity for watersports activities
- HCP has more restrictive environmental designations and is a higher flood risk
- The lean staffing structure at Milton Country Park appears to have impacted on the quality of the environment in terms of the visual appearance of some areas

Market review

- MCP has a far greater residential catchment audience within its core market areas
- The socio-economic profile is even stronger for the Milton catchment than HCP
- HCP generates a higher volume of visits from a smaller local catchment
- Both HCP and Milton CP enjoy a 'market-leading position' within their core catchment with limited competition of comparable greenspace and recreational facilities
- Milton CP is a popular and well received facility serving a mainly local audience
- Both parks enjoy a strong local user base and largely positive profile on online feedback sites

Trading operation

- The Trust structure does allow any income and surpluses to be ring-fenced and channelled back into the park where appropriate
- MCP does not have any statutory environmental designations so there are no specific obligations in terms of land management
- HCP benefits from a strong local support network in terms of the long-established Friends' Group, volunteers and long-standing user groups and clubs
- MCP operates a break-even budget with a low staffing compliment. The staff operate on a very flexible basis requiring multiple skillsets
- As a Trust, MCP has been able to leverage funds from corporate and other external organisations on an ad hoc basis
- Cambridge Sport Lakes Trust has as its main raison d'être to develop a major nationally important watersports centre, The Cambridge Sport Lakes Project, with a 2km rowing lake, car parking, visitor hub and overnight guest accommodation on the adjoining site (this has been a long-term ambition for the Trust)

Key points

It is important to acknowledge the guiding principle for both country parks to perform the key role in connecting greenways in an area faced with expanded housing stock which is strengthening demand (and need) for open spaces. At Milton Country Park, it is clear that a driving force for the operating trust centres on a long-term strategy to create a flagship watersports centre on the adjoining site. There is a strong fit between the long-term plans to develop a rowing centre of national importance and the historic link to rowing in Cambridge notably through its university.

Hinchingbrooke Country Park has a more extensive and comprehensive offer with a stronger programme of volunteering. HCP represents a long-established valuable greenspace serving a diverse and loyal user base with a substantial and very active group of volunteers and Friends who represent important stakeholders in the facility. It has employed high standards of management and guardianship over a long period and is acknowledged as achieving Green Flag status on a continuing basis. It also has a more restrictive regime in terms of statutory and other environmental designations on large parts of its site. Despite the strategic differences, the process to reach an optimum operational position is broadly similar at both parks (aiming to balance commerciality with community service and contributions to social wellbeing) in looking to present and manage an appropriate range of services in an affordable, low risk way. MCP has reached a (more or less) break-even trading position over a number of years which is to be applauded as a major achievement in the sector. The plans for Hinchingbrooke will help to move the park towards a stronger financial footing, optimising commercial opportunities while enhancing the overall experience of visitors, the range of activities and the quality of the service offered. The forecast low level of ongoing deficit at HCP represents an efficient use of funds based on cost per user and the wider community benefits afforded.