



Milton Country Park

Setting the Record Straight

In recent weeks Cllr. Deborah Roberts has made a number of statements regarding Cambridge Mencap. It is not my intention to respond in kind, rather I will confine my response to correcting her factual inaccuracies, filling in the gaps she was conveniently silent upon and correctly setting out Cambridge Mencap's position regarding the Country Park.

We are variously accused by Cllr. Roberts of running a café in the Park that is too small, opens infrequently, that we have never approached South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) with ideas about developing the café service and that in her view we do not have sufficient knowledge and expertise to manage the Park and in particular no understanding of health and safety and employer liability issues. Cllr. Roberts has made these pronouncements in her role as the 'portfolio holder' for Milton Country Park and as the spokesperson for SCDC on related matters. This is regrettable and is clearly an issue that SCDC needs to address if it is their wish to have a credible and respected spokesperson representing its position on this matter.

The true position is that Cambridge Mencap was appointed by SCDC to run a limited kiosk-style café service following a formal selection process when we and two other commercial Organisations were interviewed by a panel of Counsellors chaired by Cllr. Roberta Canon 12 years ago. Subsequently, an agreement between both parties that defines the nature and level of the café service was put in place and which we continue to work to. That agreement reflects the seasonal nature of visitor usage of the park and the need for the service to be available mainly at weekends, during school and other holidays. Cambridge Mencap has always exceeded the service requirement of the agreement and now offers a 7 day a week facility. When the agreement was entered into there was no requirement or expectation that the café would provide any income to SCDC other than a small rent. It was understood and accepted that the café could only provide a limited service to visitors because the tiny area within the Visitor Centre identified by SCDC for the location of the café physically prevented it from ever offering anything more. My predecessor, Ian May, has recently contacted me and informs me that on several occasions he personally raised with senior SCDC staff proposals to expand and develop the café facility but his proposals were

rejected. I came into post in Spring of 2003 and in the summer of 2003, Cambridge Mencap shared its view with SCDC that there was a need to provide a full café facility. This informal approach was to SCDC Chief Officer, Simon McIntosh, and was well received. Subsequently, through the autumn of 2004 to Spring 2005 Cambridge Mencap carried out an extensive survey of park visitors on the matter of the café, commissioned an architect and with the active involvement of both Cllr. Roberts and Simon McIntosh identified an area of land within the Country Park where a brand new purpose-built café was proposed to be built. On 27 May 2005 a formal presentation of the outline proposals was presented to Simon McIntosh and others of his staff at their new offices in Cambourne. Cllr. Roberts should also have been present but had given her apologies in view of her need to be at a "Cabinet" meeting that morning which was addressing the rate capping issue. Nonetheless, a full pack of the presentation was given to Simon McIntosh for her and I have no reason to believe that she was not briefed on the meeting nor given a copy of the presentation pack. The proposal was based upon Cambridge Mencap having itself already identified £.5m of funding for the project and with no assumed contribution to capital or revenue costs from SCDC. Although to date we have never received a formal response to our proposal, anecdotally we discovered that the proposal would not be pursued because of 'green belt' restrictions in the Park. Nonetheless on 22 September 2005 we expressed our formal interest to SCDC in owning or managing Milton Country Park. Opposite to what has been wrongly portrayed by Cllr. Robert I believe the above evidences a long and ongoing commitment to the Country Park.

To answer the last criticism, Cambridge Mencap has been in existence since 1947 and for some 46 years of that period has been an employer of staff governed by the same legislation and regulation as SCDC, including employment, liability and health and safety. We are now a major local employer with 97 paid staff plus (currently) 83 fully trained and CRB checked excellent volunteers. We provide a range of services for children, young people and adults with learning disabilities/physical disabilities and their families, from advocacy, respite care, employment/work experience, college training, domiciliary care, independent living support through to full residential care and leisure and recreational support, including supported holidays in the UK and abroad. We have a turnover in excess of £2m per annum, have an asset base to match and, unlike SCDC, we do not have a financial problem, as our audited accounts year on year evidence. Thus, we would have no difficulties raising funds for projects like the Country Park from the money market, should we ever need to do so. With regard to the need to have specific expertise to manage the Country Park we are in exactly the same position as SCDC. Currently their expertise is not vested in Cllr. Roberts or Simon McIntosh, rather it is vested in the Country Park Rangers who actually manage the Park on behalf of SCDC. Further, Cambridge Mencap has formally committed itself in letters to SCDC (one of which was personally sent by myself to Cllr. Roberts on 6 December 2005) that guaranteed the employment of all of the present Rangers. Thus, should Cambridge Mencap

be appointed to run the Park their continued employment is assured and their expertise and skill in Park management is retained.

Having debunked the nonsensical position taken by Cllr. Roberts there does however remain the problem for SCDC that there is a significant (one third) shortfall in the budget for the Country Park. We are also told that current year costs are in the order of £350,000. Thus from the financial year 2006/07 even with a modest cost increase of 3% that will take the figure to £360,500; a third of which puts the shortfall at £120,167.00. Cllr. Roberts' solution to not only address the shortfall but to also generate additional income is based upon two proposals. The first is to introduce a car parking charge of £1 per car per day. If Milton Country Park was in splendid rural isolation this proposal might work. The reality is that the Country Park sits at one end of Milton Village. The likelihood, therefore, is that visitors will park in side streets and/or in the adjoining areas of the light industrial area and/or Tesco's car park, all of which are nearby and very accessible. Further, Simon McIntosh acknowledged at the public meeting on 22 January 2006 that it was his expectation that only half the numbers of visitors would pay – though the reasons given were somewhat vague. Thus, of some 80,000 car visitors (SCDC stats) and allowing for season ticket holders the projected income is £35,000 per annum. It is my view that this projected income figure is over optimistic, principally because of the accessibility of nearby alternative free parking. Additionally, what is not revealed is:

1. the cost of installation and maintenance of the ticket machine/s
2. the cost of the salary or outsourced cost of the person/agency that would be responsible for safely and securely collecting the money from the machine/s and
3. the cost of a car park warden service to check tickets/issue 'Fine Notices' to defaulters.

Thus, I would suggest that the operation of a car park charge system in this particular location is highly likely to nullify (or cost more than) the income generated. The shortfall of £120,167.00 will therefore remain.

The second proposal is to:

1. Replace Cambridge Mencap as the present café service provider. In view of the fact that we have provided a Cambridge Mencap subsidised café service for the past eleven years I think it is very remiss of SCDC not to have discussed this matter with us in advance of the Public Meeting on 22 January 2006, when we first became aware of this proposal. While I do not think that this proposal, as propounded, will of itself provide a solution it would nonetheless have been more appropriate had we been consulted on this matter beforehand. Beyond this discourtesy, as it seems we are also not to be considered as the provider for the new café service (if it proceeds)

this will at some stage mean the loss of an invaluable work experience activity for seven adults with learning disabilities and the possible loss of employment by two staff unless we are able to identify suitable alternative employment. It is my view that this matter could and should have been handled far more sensitively and professionally than it has been.

2. Bring into use the first floor of the Visitor Centre by converting it and the outside balcony area into a café, managed either in-house or by a new provider yet to be identified. As I am often reminded by an architect colleague, in building terms almost anything is possible – **but at a cost**. Thus, to create a café on the scale envisaged in a non-purpose designed and built building like the Visitor Centre, with a fully fitted commercial kitchen and dining area that complies with the necessary environmental health standards the ‘ball park’ figure I am given is in excess of £100,000 excluding professional fees. Nonetheless, if SCDC despite the existing £120,000 shortfall can identify such funds then in physical terms this is possible. However, there is also the revenue consequence. To staff such a café on a seven day a week basis allowing for annual leave, sickness and training requires six staff working a rota pattern of three staff per day, split between kitchen and servery and clearing/cleaning on the first floor dining area. Depending on salary that will cost £70-£100,000 per annum in-house and possibly £60,000-£80,000 for an independent caterer. In the present difficult financial circumstances this is a costly in-house operation and while an independent operator may take it on as a franchise, that decision would clearly be significantly influenced by the cost of the rental/leasing arrangement that SCDC may have in mind. There is also the issue of the loss of a significant area on the first floor (arguably the best space in the building) which further undermines the already limited capacity of this building to serve as a Visitor Centre. It would be neither ‘fish nor fowl’ and that is not a satisfactory solution, not least because of the not inconsiderable cost in creating this strange hybrid building set off against a limited and uncertain increase in income.

In summation, neither together nor individually do these proposals give SCDC an efficient nor cost-effective solution and nowhere to date has there been any explanation given by SCDC as to how all the significant, additional funds to translate these proposals into a reality will be provided. The figures do not stack-up unless there are other service cuts elsewhere yet to be announced. Clearly that would not be welcomed. For all the different reasons stated these proposals if acted upon will create more difficulties than they solve.

Cambridge Mencap's solution to the dilemma is simple, straightforward and prevents all the unnecessary contortions and extra costs that the two present proposals would create, and, it is cost effective without being disruptive. We believe that SCDC should outsource the management of the Country Park and that by due process all/any Organisation that wishes to bid to become the management agent may then do so. We believe that an independent charitable Organisation like Cambridge Mencap would at worst be able to successfully maintain the status quo and at best (which would be our intention) to considerably improve upon the management of the Park. Further, based on our own initial assessment of the stated running costs of £350,000.00 we are confident we could run the Park at two thirds of that cost. In so doing we would immediately obviate the need to:

- Introduce car parking charges,
- Save on the cost of installation and maintenance of ticket machines
- Save on the cost of employing a car parking warden
- Save on the cost of ticket machine emptying
- Save on the costs of major building and fitting out works to create a new café and,
- Save on the associated revenue costs

Very importantly our solution also preserves the present work experience opportunity for people with learning disabilities at the existing Swallows Café. Thus, the problems of the present shortfall and the avoidance of further cost is achieved. This is surely a winning solution for everyone. We trust therefore that SCDC will now display the sort of necessary vision required at the forthcoming Council Meeting to decide to outsource the management of the Park.

Lastly, Cambridge Mencap's approach to the solution is based upon an intention, if successful in our bid, to consult widely and establish a Community Development Trust to manage the Park which would be fully representative of all sectors and interests of users/potential users of the Park. This is entirely in keeping with our aim to develop the Country Park and manage it as a **Social Enterprise**. There are already many good examples of this nationally, e.g. Greenwich Leisure Ltd manages more than 40 public leisure centres within the M25 area. In Greenwich alone, it has more than halved the costs of leisure services to the Council while increasing the quality and availability of local facilities. The first leisure trust of its kind in the UK, it has catalysed the creation of more than 100 trusts across the country. Hill Holt Wood sits on the edge of Lincolnshire where social enterprise is changing the face of forestry. An entrepreneurial approach to woodland management delivers many social and environmental benefits. The 34 acres of woodland play host to training schemes for excluded and unemployed young people, eco-construction, and the manufacture of wooden furniture. Hill Holt Wood Ltd

contracts with local authorities, schools and the Learning and Skills Council.

Cambridge Mencap firmly believes we can achieve a success story for Milton Country Park and its users and SCDC by pursuing this option. We wish to be actively involved in supporting the preservation of any already good, and potentially excellent local amenity for the benefit of the entire community. Although our Organisation is aimed at supporting people with learning disabilities/physical disabilities we believe we best achieve this by taking an inclusive approach to the development and provision of services – and this, we passionately believe is best achieved in ordinary not extraordinary ways. Thus, we are committed to integration not as a sentiment but in practice e.g. by enabling people with learning disabilities to use local shops, transport, training, employment/work experience and leisure and recreational opportunities. The more engagement there is within the community by all its members then slowly but positively we become a less exclusive and a more inclusive society. We believe that if we are enabled to bid for the management of Milton Country Park and if that bid is successful, this will potentiate a significant step forward for us to support people with learning disabilities by increasing the range of their life opportunities but doing so side by side with the rest of the community who use the Park. We believe that our twin aims of:

- (1) Promoting better integration into the local community of people with learning disabilities helps create a more inclusive society generally and
- (2) offering an efficient and cost effective solution to the management of Milton Country Park to SCDC

are not only entirely compatible and eminently worthwhile but are absolutely achievable

This is potentially a ground breaking moment for everyone concerned and I trust that SCDC will display the foresight to recognise this. We have a very comprehensive proposal that we wish to make, and which we will do once we are given all the detailed information by SCDC, and we look forward to the opportunity to present our bid.

Garry Simcox
Chief Executive
Cambridge Mencap