

Committee	Cabinet
Date	27 January 2004
Report By	Director of Transport & Environment
Title of Report	Bentley Wildfowl and Motor Museum
Purpose of Report	To consider the future and options for Bentley Wildfowl and Motor Museum (Bentley).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cabinet is recommended to:

- 1. agree to commence a consultation exercise with staff, trade unions and key stakeholders on the future of Bentley;**
 - 2. agree that Bentley should not open to the public in accordance with the normal season opening times, i.e. mid February at weekends only, pending a consultation regarding its future and;**
 - 3. agree to receive a further report at its meeting on 9 March 2004 including recommendations for the future of Bentley.**
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1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The only cost arising directly from the recommendations above are those associated with carrying out a consultation exercise. This will be achieved within existing departmental resources. There will be an element of admissions income foregone by not opening to the public during February although this is estimated to be insignificant.

1.2 This report brings to Members' attention the financial issues and associated risks which will need to be explored in more detail during the consultation period and considered with all other relevant information following its conclusion.

2. Introduction and Background

2.2 The County Council has owned and operated Bentley primarily as a tourist attraction since April 1978. The freehold interest consists of the lower floor of the main house, the wildfowl reserve, motor museum and various outbuildings which are operated as tea rooms, a shop and craft workshops as well as two cottages occupied by staff. The freehold also includes approximately 60 acres of agricultural land and woodland. A third party retains the ownership of the first floor of the main house on a 'flying freehold' basis.

2.3 The total County Council holding is surrounded by agricultural land over which the County Council has a right of access from the highway.

3. Current Operation

3.1 Bentley normally starts its season as a public tourist attraction in mid February when it opens at weekends for visitors. This is extended to full opening times around Easter each year. The main attractions include the house, wildfowl reserve and motor museum. There are also craft workshops, tea rooms, and a model railway on site. It attracts approximately 50,000 visitors each year. Included in this number are visitors to the large events organised by the Council which are held at Bentley including the annual Woodfair and, for the second time in 2003, the regional Wine and Food Festival which is run in partnership with the English Wine Centre.

3.2 Other organisations make use of the facilities and location that Bentley has to offer and a number of bookings are taken each year, for example, for weddings, car rallies and educational visits.

3.3 Bentley contributes to the Council's priorities to promote Environmental awareness and improve rural regeneration. It is by no means, however, the Council's only means of achieving these aims.

4. Financial Summary of the Operational Costs of Running Bentley

4.1 The Council incurs direct running costs of some £400,000 per annum to maintain Bentley. This is partly off-set by admissions income, rents from licences and letting fees. The net revenue costs remain in excess of £110,000 but there is also the need for annual capital investment of a further £40,000. In addition the Council will be liable for future increased maintenance costs as they become due.

5. Considerations

5.1 Although the Council's objective has always been to ensure that Bentley is run as effectively as possible, during the last eighteen months Members have been reviewing its operation and exploring opportunities to reduce the annual net cost to the Council and its taxpayers. The need for this action has been driven largely by the Council's wish to ensure resources are focused on core priorities and the impact on the council tax payer is minimised as part of the County wide Reconciling Policy and Resources initiative.

5.2 A joint Board of Scrutiny Members and Cabinet has worked together during the last six months and has reached a view, with the aid of an external consultant, that there is little potential for further efficiencies or to generate significant additional income through admissions to help reduce the funding gap. Similarly, there is little need or potential to use the asset for other Council purposes and indeed this would require further significant capital investment which is not available to the Council.

5.3 Members are conscious of the need to balance the benefits realised from Bentley, which is a non-core function of the Council, with the needs of other critical services such as Education, Social Services, Road Maintenance and high priority Environmental projects. Continuing this level of annual investment (with the likelihood of an increase in annual liabilities) is, therefore, not considered reasonable and its future operation must be urgently considered.

6. Conclusion & Reason for Recommendations

6.1 A consultation exercise with key stakeholders is considered essential before recommendations can be made about the future of Bentley.

6.2 With the level of uncertainty currently, it would be inadvisable to continue operations and open as planned in February as this would undoubtedly result in longer term commitments being made and may expose the Council to further financial loss.

6.3 It is therefore recommended that Bentley should remain closed pending a consultation exercise with those groups mentioned above (Recommendation 1) with a further report to the Cabinet meeting in March outlining options and recommendations for the future.

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