

Public
Key Decision – Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter:	Parks & Open Spaces – Commercial Sustainability Plan
Meeting/Date:	O&S (Environment, Communities & Partnerships) – 5 th March 2026 Cabinet – 17 th March 2026
Executive Portfolio:	Executive Councillor for Parks and Countryside, Waste and Street Scene – (Councillor Julie Kerr)
Report by:	Head of Leisure, Health & Environment (Gregg Holland)
Ward(s) affected:	All Ward(s)

Executive Summary:

This report sets out the comprehensive work undertaken by Officer's in conjunction with an external consultancy Theme 3 (T3) towards the development and proposed delivery of a new Commercial Sustainability Plan for the Parks and Open Spaces service with the aim of reducing the service's costs to the Council.

An internal review of the service's commercial opportunities was undertaken in early 2025 by the Commercial Delivery Manager. To aid and enhance this review staff engagement sessions were facilitated to ensure that we had captured vital feedback in how our colleagues working across the district wide sites felt we could maximise commercial projects and to underpin a One team approach towards making the service financially sustainable by 2028.

In May 2025, the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment with support from the Commercial Delivery Manager commissioned T3 an external consultancy to review the internal commercial review and staff engagement feedback and they were asked to *“to create a fully costed investment plan with a creative overview of ‘commercial opportunities’ - for a total of 5 sites”*.

- a) Hinchingsbrooke Country Park
- b) Paxton Pits
- c) Riverside Park, St Neots
- d) Riverside Park, Huntingdon
- e) Priors Park, St Neots

The commercial investment plan requested from the consultants had a goal to develop a fully costed investment plan, driving additional revenue of £700,000 per annum into the service by the end of financial year 2027/2028.

Following the conclusion of the independent review by T3 further staff engagement sessions were facilitated where the Commercial Delivery Manager presented the Commercial Strategy findings with the aim of gauging any further and final feedback from colleagues so that a full and final report could be prepared and presented to Council to ensure a phased approach to capital investment could be proposed and delivered aiming to facilitate new and innovative activities and services across Parks and Open Spaces to drive investment, increase revenue and empower staff to deliver a commercially sustainable service.

This report therefore aims to set out and summarise the new Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Strategy and underlying principles, to seek approval of the proposed capital investment in Phase 1, to acknowledge that further capital bids for Phase 2 will be developed and submitted as part of the budget and MTF process for 2027/2028 and to allow the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment delegated authority to deliver the Phase 1 programme of works during 2026/2027.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet/Committee is

RECOMMENDED

1. To endorse the principles put forward in the T3 Commercial Opportunities Report (**Appendix 1**), which will be adopted in seeking to support activities to reduce the costs of the service to the Council and provide a commercially sustainable approach for the service; and which will continue to contribute to the Council's wider strategies and outcomes for the District.
2. To support the principles set out can be used in connection with the identified sites, but also applied in relation to other sites which the Council is or may become responsible for; including those falling within the remit of the Head of Leisure, Health and Environment to support wildlife and conservation, health and wellbeing, physical activity and the introduction of new commercial opportunities.
3. To approve the outline recommendations put forward by T3 Commercial Opportunities Report (**Appendix 1**), by external consultants, the proposed Phase 1 capital investment plan and wider direction of travel as outlined within this report.
4. To approve the proposed Phase 1 programme of investment utilising the capital bids (£1m) which have been included within the 26/27 budget; and which have subsequently been agreed as part of the Council's Capital Programme.

5. To acknowledge and support that the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment continue to develop plans for Phase 2 and will submit capitals bids as part of the 27/28 budget setting process – or earlier if possible and supported by the Corporate Director (Finance and Resources) and Section 151 Officer.
6. To delegate to the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment all necessary activities required to deliver the capital expenditure plan (Phase 1), and within the agreed budgets enable the development, finalisation and delivery of new programmes, events and attractions which align with the principles agreed, and which will contribute to the commercially sustainable approach agreed.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to brief and seek endorsement from Councillor's on the work undertaken by Officer's and T3 an external consultancy in the development of a new Parks & Open Spaces – Commercial Sustainability Plan; and subsequent to that agreement, support delivery of activities and interventions which align with the plan and will contribute towards the overall aim of providing a financially sustainable service.
- 1.2 This report also provides background on the current financial position and cost to the Council of operating the Park's and Open Spaces service and thus the key drivers behind the creation, development and proposed delivery programme of the new Commercial Sustainability Plan aimed at removing the operating cost of the service to the Council.
- 1.3 Detail is given on the approach undertaken by Officer's and T3 in the development of the Commercial Sustainability Plan. The plan includes a fully costed investment plan with a creative overview of commercial opportunities spanning five key sites across Parks and Open Spaces.
- 1.4 The report outlines the key principles of the plan with the aim of enhancing the visitor experience for visitors and how if approved it can support the delivery of the Corporate Plan, Place Strategy and overall service and financial objectives and improvements.
- 1.5 The report includes the recommendations identified by T3 during their work, and their conclusions that if adopted by the Council the plan will enhance and further improve the visitor experience, footfall to our open spaces, dwell time (how long residents stay) and income across our sites.
- 1.6 This report will set out clearly the proposed capital investment plan for Phase 1 – which is now included within the Councils agreed Capital Programme and the plan for delivery; and outlines that a wider development plan for Phase 2 that will be put forward and submitted as an extra capital investment bid in the 2027-2028 budget process.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 [The HDC Healthy Open Spaces Strategy was created and published in 2020.](#)
- 2.2 The Healthy Open Spaces Strategy was created to ensure that the parks and open spaces across the district continued to be used and valued by the community and also explore how they can support wider positive change. It set out to understand how greenspaces across Huntingdonshire can support local people to live healthier lives, improve their mental health and wellbeing, contribute to the fight against climate change and address social isolation.

- 2.3 A £1.5m investment was agreed by Council (January 2019) to ensure the sustainability of strategic open spaces in Huntingdonshire, without subsidy. This concentrated on Hinchingsbrooke Country Park (HCP). This business case had aspirations as set out below:
- a) provide greater leisure opportunities to increase physical activity levels
 - b) deliver accessible green space and countryside with greater opportunity for positive activities that support residents' health and well-being
 - c) continue to support and grow volunteering opportunities
 - d) deliver a sustainable community facility
 - e) address local car parking issues
- 2.4 The Council successfully negotiated the start of a new 99-year lease until 2121 (June 2021), signed 25th of February 2022. The outline site design and location for the enhanced car parking facilities were agreed by Cabinet on 20th January 2022. The project secured an additional £1.5 million from Community Infrastructure Levy on 21st March 2022.
- 2.5 In addition to this on 8th September 2022 Council approved an updated report on Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and the main purpose of this was as follows:
- a) To provide an update on the background to the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park investment project.
 - b) To present the updated anticipated business case supporting the investment proposal along with a worst- and best-case model.
 - c) To gain approval for the £2.994m Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Investment Project funded via £1.5m Capital Investment and £1.499m CIL award.
- 2.6 One of the main catalysts for finalising and moving forward with the capital project at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park was to utilise the new Countryside Centre and associated café plus increased parking provision to improve income generation and help reduce the cost of the service to the Council.
- 2.7 The above confirms that for some years now, the Council has had an agreed direction of travel to seek to improve the quality of existing assets such as Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, which offer wide ranging benefits to both residents and visitors. However, the direction has also sought to maximise income potential in order to provide a more commercially sustainable model for the service and reduce the financial demands on the Council for this discretionary service.

2.8 For a wider understanding on the service cost to the Council please see the table illustrated below:

	2026/27 Budget (Baseline)	2027/28 New Budget (Baseline)	2028/29 New Budget (Baseline)	2029/30 New Budget (Baseline)	2030/31 New Budget (Baseline)
Expenditure	£1,472,674	£1,529,491	£1,571,575	£1,609,630	£1,641,869
Income	(£624,149)	(£718,837)	(£774,663)	(£813,548)	(£848,548)
Deficit	£848,525	£810,654	£796,912	£796,082	£793,321

2.9 Currently the service is budgeted to cost £848,000 in 2026-2027 and £4m over the MTF5 period so the main driver for changing the financial outlook within the service should be centred more around income generation with wider efficiency review of costs.

2.10 In February 2025, the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment was tasked with identifying opportunities across the service to help support the income generation and reduction of costs to support the wider financial sustainability of the service.

2.11 A dedicated Commercial Delivery Manager was recruited to the Parks and Open Spaces team in early 2025 and this role centred around developing a commercial strategy for parks and open spaces to include:

- a) The review of opportunities for generating income through existing activities including all Service Level Agreement's (SLA's)
- b) Reviewing of all buildings and spaces across the service to understand wider opportunities for income generation
- c) Drive the development of the commercialisation of parks and open spaces and to review educational opportunities, visitor engagement, events activation, marketing and promotion across the district

2.12 Following this review the Commercial Delivery Manager and Head of Leisure, Health & Environment undertook staff engagement sessions to update colleagues on the commercial review, to ensure there was transparency on what outcome we wanted to achieve from the process and to understand their views on what they believed could be developed and implemented across the district to improve the commercial sustainability of our open spaces. This session was held on 11th June 2025.

2.13 Following the staff engagement session the commercial review as stated above and staff feedback were provided to an external consultancy called T3 in May 2025. They were asked to *"to create a fully costed investment plan with a creative overview of 'commercial opportunities' - for a total of 5 sites"*:

- a) Hinchingsbrooke Country Park
- b) Paxton Pits
- c) Riverside Park, St Neots

- d) Riverside Park, Huntingdon
- e) Priory Park, St Neots

- 2.14 The commercial investment plan requested from the consultants had a “goal to develop a fully costed investment plan, driving additional revenue of £700,000 per annum into the service by the end of financial year 2027/2028”.
- 2.15 Following the conclusion of the work by T3 a final staff engagement session was facilitated on 28th November 2025 where we shared the T3 findings and to enable the team to comment on and gain more exposure to the work that had been undertaken. A further session to finalise staff feedback was undertaken on 8th January 2026.
- 2.16 The utilisation of this staff led approach and the use of T3 has been critical at underpinning the new Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan and its key principles. Section 3 provides the overarching detail behind the plan and principles required to deliver Phase 1 and provides initial options for consideration around Phase 2.

3. COMMERCIAL STRATEGY & KEY PRINCIPLES

- 3.1 T3 are an external consultancy who “specialise in the development, creation and design of commercially successful visitor experiences”. They have undertaken extensive works for organisations such as Merlin Entertainment, Centre Parcs, Bourne Leisure and Warwick Castle.
- 3.2 Their underlying mission is “to always bring a fresh perspective to the creation of memorable experiences so they pro-actively challenge, are true to their client’s brand, connect positively with visitors and are commercially successful”.
- 3.3 As stated earlier within Section 2 of the report T3 were selected to help define a new commercial vision for the Council’s parks and open spaces. They were asked to “to create a fully costed investment plan with a creative overview of ‘commercial opportunities’ - for a total of 5 sites”:
- a) Hinchingsbrooke Country Park
 - b) Paxton Pits
 - c) Riverside Park, St Neots
 - d) Riverside Park, Huntingdon
 - e) Priory Park, St Neots
- 3.4 The commercial investment plan requested from the consultants had a “goal to develop a fully costed investment plan, driving additional revenue of £700,000 per annum into the service by the end of financial year 2027/2028”.
- 3.5 In line with the above request outlined within 3.4, Officer’s also asked T3 to consider within their review and recommendations the following key points:

- a) Review & propose initial ideas
 - b) Focus on traditional commercial gain products
 - c) Focus on Quick Wins
 - d) Environmental Considerations
 - e) Desirability in terms of local demographic
- 3.6 As part of the process T3 also considered high level benchmarking across the U.K, Europe and Globally when comparing data on the Councils parks and open spaces to other successful operations. This work can be seen in **Appendix 2**.
- 3.7 To underpin the improvement required in the visitor experience across the Council's parks and open spaces T3 outlined that the following key commercial principles should be adopted not only as part of the new Commercial Sustainability Plan, but also on a case by case basis moving forward when evaluating the viability of new innovative products and services that we may offer. These principles are seen below:
- a) Creating quality food, play and events offerings, which meet modern demographic expectations and prolong dwell time. (Golden 4 Hour!)
 - b) Involve experienced operators to maximize potential
 - c) Create products that have high marketing potential
 - d) Clustered products to facilitate easier use of multiple products and maximise staff presence and labour costs
 - e) Appeal to a wide variety of users
 - f) Building BRAND and RECOGNITION
 - g) Supporting Local Growth across Huntingdonshire
- 3.8 T3 used the following selection principles as part of their recommendations of activities and services that the Council could offer across its sites. These are seen below:
- a) Drive footfall and Increase dwell time
 - b) Generate sustainable income streams
 - c) Appeal to multiple users
 - d) Create a Wow factor and Pester Power
- 3.9 Within their profiling T3 defined the target audiences as follows:
- a) Young & Midlife Adults (20-49 years old)
 - b) Mid-Life Adults (35 – 54 years old)
 - c) Active 50s (55 – 64 years old)
- 3.10 The primary catchment for Huntingdonshire is classed as “family heavy and older rich adult”.
- 3.11 In addition to the work T3 undertook on the newly created Commercial Sustainability Plan for Parks and Open Spaces and its key principles set out within Section 3 they also advised and provided some wider ranging recommendations as outlined below that they collectively felt would add

more value and go further in the commerciality and financial sustainability of the service. These were:

1. Create a shared vision for Huntingdonshire Parks & Open Spaces:
 - Inclusive access for all
 - Health and wellbeing benefits
 - Safe and engaging spaces for families
 - Opportunities to celebrate nature, heritage, and community
2. Explore growth in adventure and experience - based leisure in Parks & Open Spaces
3. Review demand for staycations and accommodation
4. Develop and implement plans for *“profitable park cafes and concessions”*
5. Assess the opportunities from the “Rise of outdoor fitness” as a business model
6. Consider opportunities across Eco-Conscious consumer spending
 - Low impact outdoor activities – foraging tours
7. Events & “Festivilisation” of Green Spaces – Launch a dedicated events programme
8. Develop Artificial Intelligence (AI) opportunities across parks & open spaces
 - Improves monetization, maintenance and user experience
9. Improve digital integration and booking platforms

3.12 The activities and services that have been developed by T3 and the financial information supplied by them and that of the wider work undertaken by Officer’s can be seen in Section 5.

3.13 It should be recognised that the key activities and costings identified within the work were provided to form the basis of the identification of necessary budgets, the final activities and interventions may change, and flexibility will need to be available to enable an agile and commercial approach to be adopted, which can be responsive to changing needs and demands; provided that they continue to align with the overall principles and direction of travel of the plan.

3.14 This plan will allow the Council to set a clear vision to address the core challenge head on which is the cost of the parks and open spaces service to the Council as it is a non-statutory service. This is a discretionary service and in light of the reduction of funding from Government and a higher number of nationwide Council’s with financial issues it is important that the Council take a flexible, transparent and pragmatic approach to reduce the cost and ensure that our parks and open spaces are protected for future generations.

3.15 The approach the Council wishes to undertake by implementing the Commercial Sustainability Plan is similar to the approach they took in ensuring that One Leisure moved from a financial deficit of circa £250,000 in 2022-2023 and towards a surplus of circa £600,000 in 2026-2027.

3.16 This happened through adopting a more commercial approach through a review of pricing, targeting increases in membership levels and swim

school pupils, launching new membership options, reviewing our cost base and identifying opportunities on how we could adopt new business into the centres through our wider relationships with stakeholders. It is important to note that leisure was a non-statutory service and with patience, time, trust and a clear plan the Officer and staff teams were able to successfully transform the business around in 3 years.

- 3.17 To conclude on One Leisure and the transformation that the service has seen in recent years it is important that other lessons are learnt from that process which centre around ensuring there is a varied and diversified offer in programming, the ability to be agile and flexible in how we operate and what we offer visitors and ensuring there is balance across everything we do. These important items need to be integrated into the new plan for parks and open spaces and enshrined as the golden thread through how we operate over the coming years.
- 3.18 Whilst the success that we hope to see from the delivery of the new plan is commercial sustainability for the service it has to be a multi-faceted approach and a mix of new products and services and a forensic review on a continued basis of the costs that we expend. Whilst we need the commercial approach, we must endeavour to be sensitive in how we deliver the programme particularly where there are residents within the immediate area but not stopping the teams from attracting visitors from other areas to enjoy our parks and open spaces.
- 3.19 Further opportunities exist to support the commercial journey across parks and open spaces and examples of this are around the mechanism in which we use the car park revenues particularly at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park following its capital investment. Alongside this new health funding can be investigated to review the opportunity to expand programming and draw more visitors to our sites and importantly use the spaces to become more physically active, spend more recreational time, be one with nature and the wider benefits that brings to residents and to spend time with their families.
- 3.20 To aid the roll out of the Commercial Sustainability Plan a comprehensive Communication and Engagement Plan will be developed to ensure that we can communicate clearly with our residents and visitors, but at the same time provide a transparent way for them to feedback to the Council and operational teams so that we can consistently improve the service we offer. In addition to this and as part of the same plan we would also ensure there were simplistic systems and procedures in place to facilitate a robust management system for complaints or noise resolution.
- 3.21 To support the facilitation and success of both the Commercial Sustainability Plan and the Communication and Engagement Plan the Leisure, Health & Environment team are currently recruiting for a dedicated Marketing & Communications Manager for the service who will be supported by a wider support team of marketing professionals. In addition, a revenue bid for marketing expenditure was submitted as part of the budgetary process for 2026-2027 to support both programmes.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM (LGR)

- 4.1 As stated earlier within this report the creation and proposed delivery of the Commercial Sustainability Plan enables the Council to be innovative and dynamic in its aim to lower the cost of the service and to secure financial sustainability.
- 4.2 By facilitating the programme of investment outlined in Phase 1 it does not inextricably bind any future Council to the plan, but it does allow foundations to be set now and a future direction of travel to be formed allowing the existing Council and its visitors to benefit in the short term.
- 4.3 Moving on from this the new Council could seek to continue to enhance the investment in new activities and services based upon performance or it could reduce levels of service should it seek too, but it would hopefully have a solid foundation to work from and ultimately subject to the success of the plan the new Council would have a commercially sustainable business to inherit.
- 4.4 The wider benefits that this scheme will bring upon its delivery particularly with Local Government Reform in mind are as follows:
- a) All of the projects can be delivered within 2 years prior to the full commencement of LGR
 - b) The delivery of these new products and services leaves a legacy for Huntingdonshire residents
 - c) It provides a great opportunity to enhance the visitor economy and links to wider local growth across the District
 - d) Based upon the mix of new activities we are proposing to launch it enables opportunities for new jobs, skills & training
 - e) The programme will deliver commercial sustainability (reduces the cost of the service) prior to LGR
 - f) The plan embraces workforce development and succession
 - g) Ultimately it leaves a lasting and positive impact for the new unitary authority

5. FINANCIAL INFORMATION

- 5.1 The proposed capital investment plan developed and presented to Officer's by T3 can be viewed in **Appendix 3**.
- 5.2 The capital investment plan is recommending a £2m investment over the next two years inclusive of 2026-2027 and 2027-2028. From the plan and based upon the activities identified for delivery and the improvement in revenue it would generate a betterment of £2.5m over a four year period.
- 5.3 However, as stated earlier within this report in Section 2.15 following the receipt of the Commercial Sustainability Plan from T3 Officer's facilitated a final staff engagement session and workshopped what they felt were the best products and services to offer across the District with the aim of creating a commercially sustainable service. This can be seen in **Appendix 4**.

- 5.4 The total capital investment submitted within the 2026-2027 Council budget for Phase 1 is £1,170,000. This amount spans across 2026-2027 and 2027-2028.
- 5.5 Within this amount and as shown in **Appendix 4** Officers are putting forward an Aqua Park (£170,000) and High Ropes (£500,000) for delivery in 2026-2027 and for the wider financial benefit to be seen in the same period. The rest of the activities totalling £500,000 will be delivered in 2027-2028 and the commercial benefit will be seen in the same financial period.
- 5.6 The Head of Leisure, Health & Environment will submit a new capital bid for Phase 2 for £1m in the 2027-2028 budget. The activities outlined for delivery and their wider financial benefit can be seen in **Appendix 5**.
- 5.7 In totality and inclusive of Phase 1 and Phase 2 the capital investment is just over £2m. This can be seen in **Appendix 5**.
- 5.8 The table below illustrates the financial position of parks and open spaces over the next 5 years as per the budget put forward for 2026-2027. The table shows the direct income and expenditure of the service and the overall costs (deficit) per year as outlined in Section 2.8.
- 5.9 Under the title “Project Improvement” line in the table this shows the financial improvement in revenue (the difference between income and expenditure) and the direct impact implementing these new products and services will have on the cost of the service over the next five years.

Updated Budget Position (Following Commercial Strategy)					
	2026/27 Budget (Baseline)	2027/28 New Budget (Baseline)	2028/29 New Budget (Baseline)	2029/30 New Budget (Baseline)	2030/31 New Budget (Baseline)
Expenditure	1,472,674	1,529,491	1,571,575	1,609,630	1,641,869
Income	-624,149	-718,837	-774,663	-813,548	-848,548
Deficit	848,525	810,654	796,912	796,082	793,321
Project Improvement	-110,000	-469,104	-709,896	-759,390	-708,119
Updated Deficit	738,525	341,550	87,016	36,692	13,202

- 5.10 Following the inclusion of the project improvement figures it shows that the cost of the service is proposed to reduce from £848,525 to £738,525 in 2026-2027 following the implementation of the Aqua Park.
- 5.11 After the delivery of Phase 1 the deficit for the service will reduce from £738,525 in 2026-2027 to £341,550 in 2027-2028. Then subsequently following the proposed delivery of Phase 2 investment the deficit will reduce further from £341,550 (2027-2028) to £87,016 in 2028-2029.

- 5.12 At this stage, the figures demonstrated within the table above and in points 5.10 and 5.11 do not show all of the impact from the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park capital project (Countryside Centre & extra car parking), the wider development or commercial impact of the proposed refurbishment of the existing café nor does it include the financial benefits of the Habitat Banking Programme approved by Cabinet and as outlined earlier within this report.
- 5.13 The Head of Leisure, Health & Environment has worked with the Head of Finance and wider finance colleagues to identify the revenue impact of the capital required, its inclusion within the 2026-2027 budget and on the repayment of the capital, its interest and the provision of the Minimum Revenue Payments (MRP).
- 5.14 The Commercial Sustainability Plan requires capital investment of £1.17m in Phase 1 (2026/27–2027/28) and an anticipated £1m Phase 2 capital bid in 2027/28, resulting in a total planned investment of just over £2m across the two phases. The financial modelling provided by T3, reviewed and refined by officers, demonstrates that this investment will generate substantial additional income and reduce the net operating cost of the Parks and Open Spaces service over the Medium-Term Financial Strategy period.
- 5.15 Phase 1 projects, including the Aqua Park and High Ropes, are expected to reduce the service deficit from £848,525 to £738,525 in 2026/27, with further reductions to £341,550 in 2027/28 as full-year benefits materialise. Following the implementation of Phase 2 improvements, the deficit is forecast to reduce significantly again to £87,016 in 2028/29, eventually reaching £13,202 by 2030/31, thereby moving the service close to full cost recovery and long-term financial sustainability.
- 5.16 The capital programme assumptions include provision for borrowing costs, interest, and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP), with the impacts for the delivery of Phase 1 already incorporated into the 2026/27 budget through collaboration between the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment and Finance.
- 5.17 The projected income improvements do not yet include the future financial benefits arising from the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park capital project or the Habitat Banking Programme, both of which are expected to further strengthen the financial position once operational. Given that Parks and Open Spaces is a discretionary service currently costing the Council over £848,000 per year, the proposed investment is essential to reducing ongoing subsidy pressures and supporting the Council's wider financial sustainability objectives. The approach mirrors the successful commercial recovery of One Leisure, demonstrating the potential for a similar transformation within Parks and Open Spaces through targeted investment, operational flexibility and improved income generation.
- 5.18 It is important to note that whilst approval is being sought for the overarching recommendations and capital investment set out within this

report wider delegation and flexibility is required whilst reviewing each business case to ensure the right service level assessment and return on investment is captured. This will depend on market changes, new products emerging on the market so therefore we must remain agile, but the overall envelope created is sufficient to allow financial flexibility and bring forward income generation.

6. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

6.1 The comments of the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be included in this section prior to its consideration by the Cabinet.

7. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

7.1 The table set out in **Appendix 6** outlines the high-level project risks, likelihood and mitigation across the following criteria which are closely associated in the development and proposed delivery of the new Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan. These are:

- a) Capital Investment
- b) Health, Safety & Compliance
- c) Commercial Performance
- d) Local Government Reform (LGR)
- e) Stakeholder Engagement
- f) Programme & Project Management
- g) Ecological Impact

7.2 Detailed Risk Management is embedded within both the Councils BAU activity, and project specific activity, and is considered to be able to be considered as part of established processes. The proposals do not present any unknown or unique risks that the Council is unable to manage or mitigate.

8. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

8.1 The table below outlines the timelines involved in delivering the stated capital investment projects within Phase 1 and Phase 2:

Phase	Timeline
Phase 1:	2026-2027
Phase 2:	2027/2028

8.2 As stated earlier within the report all Phase 2 commercial opportunities will be developed and will be submitted as one capital bid for approval via the 2027/2028 budget and MTFS process, or earlier if possible and supported by the Corporate Director (Finance and Resources) and Section 151 Officer.

9. LINK TO CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

9.1 The development and delivery of the Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan strongly supports our corporate objectives and priorities in the following ways:

Corporate Plan:

The Corporate Plan has three key priorities and these are:

1. Improving the quality of life for local people
2. Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations
3. Delivering good quality, high value for money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations

- a) Improving the quality of life for local people

A Heritage Lottery Fund survey revealed that:

- a) 95% of visits to parks and open spaces are enjoyable, peaceful and relaxing
- b) 60% of visitors take more physical exercise because they use parks
- c) 80% say the park helps make their area more attractive and a better place to live

The aim of launching the Commercial Sustainability Plan and its key activities is to provide visitors wider access, choice and opportunity to visit our green spaces supporting our corporate plan priority of improving residents quality of life for local people.

Further evidence from the National Heritage Fund also stated that the contribution of parks and open spaces can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. Combats loneliness and encourages community cohesion.

- b) Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations

The creation and delivery of new products and services within the Commercial Sustainability Plan coupled with T3's wider recommendations showcase the opportunity across the district to improve services for residents and for visitors in providing them a wider array of activities to participate in thus supporting an increase in visitation, dwell time, cost per visit and to be physically active providing an environment fit for future generations.

- c) Delivering good quality, high value for money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations

The Commercial Sustainability Plan allows the Council and Officer's the opportunity to introduce new products and services and to ensure they are good quality, high value for money services with good control and compliance.

In support of the Corporate Plan the Council if it chooses can **“Do”** this themselves by utilising their expertise and existing services to best serve Huntingdonshire or they could **“Enable”** these

opportunities to improve our parks and open spaces working with and listening to local businesses and finally they could “**Influence**” by working with partner organisations and stakeholders to create a shared vision that benefits Huntingdonshire.

Place Strategy:

- a) **Pride in Place:** Supports stronger identity and community connection by enhancing park quality, branding key sites, and hosting events that draw visitors. Community programmes, such as volunteering and adopt-a-park schemes, build local pride, increase usage and reduce maintenance pressures, while creating income opportunities through markets and pop-ups. Examples include themed or heritage-linked events in Riverside Park (Huntingdon), Priory Park (St Neots) or Hinchingsbrooke Country Park (Huntingdon).
- b) **Inclusive Economy:** Uses parks as drivers of local prosperity by creating green-skills employment pathways, apprenticeships and partnerships with colleges and defence employers. Small businesses benefit from concessions e.g. cafés, fitness providers and seasonal traders, while parks offer spaces for enterprise pilots and circular-economy initiatives
- c) **Health Embedded:** Positions parks as essential health infrastructure, supporting social prescribing, active travel and outdoor fitness. Inclusive, accessible spaces improve wellbeing for all ages, while health-based activities e.g. yoga, bootcamps and wellbeing retreats can provide commercial opportunities in partnership with NHS, voluntary groups and armed forces welfare teams.
- d) **Environmental Innovation:** Drives sustainability through biodiversity net gain, rewilding, carbon reduction and climate-resilient landscapes. Green innovation creates revenue streams via environmental education, eco-tourism, biodiversity credits and research partnerships. Circular-economy practices such as composting and timber reuse can further enhance commercial sustainability.
- e) **Travel Transformed:** Improves access to parks through better walking, cycling and public transport links. EV charging and active travel hubs offer new income potential while supporting greener travel. Enhanced accessibility increases visitor flow, strengthening opportunities for events, guided activities and commercial services.
- f) **Collaboration** sits at the heart of delivery working with communities, businesses, MOD partners, schools and environmental organisations to invest in and manage green assets. Embedding place based priorities in governance and contracting ensures parks contribute to district-wide goals for health, climate resilience and economic prosperity.

Economic Growth Strategy:

- a) Aligned with the Tourism Growth Plan and the Economic Growth Strategy, the Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan translates strategic ambitions into tangible, place-based outcomes: driving economic growth, boosting the visitor economy, encouraging enterprise, reducing public subsidy, and supporting sustainable place-making.
- b) The Plan supports the Economic Growth Strategy by creating local enterprise opportunities, encouraging private and inward investment, and ensuring council-owned leisure assets operate sustainably. Through a phased capital investment programme, the Council can unlock the economic potential of its parks, reduce long-term subsidies, and contribute to broader objectives for place-making, employment, and district-wide economic development.

Tourism Growth Plan:

- a) The Tourism Growth Plan identifies the District's blue and green spaces as key assets and central to its tourism identity. By introducing new events, activities, attractions, improved infrastructure, and revenue-generating experiences, the Council directly enhances the district's tourism offer and improves the overall visitor experience - two core objectives of the Tourism Growth Plan.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 A long-term lease of 99 years is in place between Cambridgeshire County Council and Huntingdonshire District Council for Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. Wider detail on this is outlined in Section 2.
- 10.2 [Cabinet approved an "Extension of Leases" at Paxton Pit Nature Reserve on 16th September 2025](#). As part of this Officer's will utilise this agreement to support the principle of Officers engaging in efforts to acquire land and buildings in connection with the principle of exploring wider opportunities to not only develop existing sites across the Council's parks and open spaces but also new sites and spaces to support wildlife and conservation, health and wellbeing, physical activity and commercial sustainability opportunities.
- 10.3 All other sites proposed as the "5 key commercial sites" which are Riverside Park, St Neots, Riverside Park, Huntingdon and Priory Park, St Neots are managed by the Council and therefore the delivery of the Commercial Sustainability Plan across these sites will be in keeping with their surroundings and subject to the right and proper local resident and stakeholder engagement.
- 10.4 In the event that the Council chooses to review the operational delivery of some of its agreements around the new products or services there may be a requirement for the Council to enter into agreements with third party

providers. However, this will be considered on a case by case basis and when needed relevant and independent legal advice will be sought and reviewed. Albeit Officer's will where possible utilise existing and in-house legal advice for business as usual activities.

11. HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The Healthy Open Spaces Strategy identifies play and access to parks and open spaces as a critical intervention for tackling social isolation, improving mental health, and promoting physical activity from an early age. Well-designed parks and open spaces can encourage active lifestyles, support emotional resilience, and provide opportunities for social interaction, which are essential for reducing loneliness and building stronger communities.
- 11.2 These outcomes align directly with the Corporate Plan priorities, particularly Priority 1: Improving health and wellbeing, and contribute to the Council's overarching ambition to keep people well and out of crisis. By implementing a new Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan it will enable and influence a wider product and service offering for local residents to use our parks and open spaces, allowing more people to visit, spend more time at these spaces with their families which will support the wider ambition of creating a healthier community but also a commercially sustainable service.
- 11.3 The proposal and delivery of the new Commercial Sustainability Plan will be supported and enhanced by the approved "[A Sustainable Framework for Play in Huntingdonshire](#)" which will see a £750,000 capital investment to play park infrastructure across the district over the next 4 years aimed at improving our play offering for future generations and aiming to draw more residents into our parks and open spaces and to support the wider mental, social and health benefits this will create for local people and their children.
- 11.4 The Council has also recently approved the delivery of a [Habitat Banking Programme](#) across district wide sites not only to support the commercial sustainability agenda but importantly targeted to attract more local residents to our parks and open spaces allowing them to be more accessible so the wider health and wellbeing benefits of using these important assets can be fulfilled by the entire community that they serve.
- 11.5 This opportunity will also allow the Active Lifestyles and Sport Development teams a wider opportunity to utilise the parks and open spaces to develop and enhance their programming and provide residents a wider service offering opportunity to stay fit and healthy.
- 11.6 Overall, increased use of our parks and open spaces will benefit local residents and provide greater access to these spaces to help improve their quality of life, create a better Huntingdonshire for future generations and offer good quality value for money services.

12. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- 12.1 The stakeholder engagement plan has been developed to support the proposed Commercial Sustainability Plan and the actions that stem from it. Please see below:

Stakeholder	Status
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Staff engagement sessions facilitated- Staff 1-2-1's with Head of Service (45)- Weekly staff drop-in sessions & email introduced
Friend's Group's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Head of Service attendance at quarterly meetings- Setting expectations for commercial sustainability
Resident's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developing links & Head of Service + key management staff to attend resident group meetings from April 2026 onwards
Clubs/Hirer's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Full review of clubs & hirers undertaken since February 2026- Full understanding of who uses our spaces, fees & charges & what we can do
Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To work with Economic Development team to assess wider opportunities to enhance visitor economy through associated project delivery
Visitor's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Stakeholder & Communications Plan to be developed from April 2026 to update on opportunities across parks & open spaces as projects move towards delivery- Parks & Open Spaces email exists for day-to-day contact from residents to feedback to operational teams

13. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 Our parks and open spaces are currently managed by a Ranger service to support nature, conservation and biodiversity to a high standard.
- 13.2 At every point of the introduction of a new commercial activity a robust and external ecological impact assessment will be undertaken to ensure that a balanced approach to delivery is taken, relevant mitigations are put in place or that we do not proceed at all.
- 13.3 It can be noted by a number of the commercial activities that have been proposed as part of Phase 1 and 2 that these are nature based and that they are in-keeping with local management plans in place at sites.
- 13.4 To ensure a considered approach is undertaken with biodiversity and ecology across the sites that we wish to implement new activities we will consider and where possible adopt the following principles:

- a) Integrate biodiversity into design – embedding ecological features into commercial projects
- b) Implement clean, green practices – ensuring operators and partners adopt approaches such as renewable energy, waste reduction and eco-friendly materials
- c) Balance development with ecological protection – looking at zoning commercial activity to safeguard habitats leaving most green space untouched whilst enhancing conservation
- d) Re-Invest commercial revenue into bio-diversity – funding habitat restoration, rewilding, and education initiatives that directly benefit the parks ecosystems
- e) Promoting eco-conscious partnerships – selecting food, beverage and event partners who share sustainability values and support the parks environmental goals

13.5 In line with this new approach and as part of the programming across the parks and open spaces service we are currently exploring wider opportunities to test and introduce further educational and volunteering opportunities for children, young people and adults.

14. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 14.1 To create and launch a new Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan
- 14.2 To utilise this plan to reduce the operational cost of £848,000 (2026-2027) to the service by March 2028.
- 14.3 To allow the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment to deliver the Phase 1 capital investment programme outlined within this report to support point 14.2.
- 14.4 To seek approval from Council that the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment can continue to progress and develop investment plans for the Phase 2 programme delivery and submit these for approval as part of the 2027/2028 budget process.
- 14.5 To use the new Commercial Sustainability Plan to support the wider Council corporate strategic priorities set out within the Corporate Plan and Place Strategies.

15. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 - T3 Commercial Opportunities Report

Appendix 2 - Benchmarking Review

Appendix 3 - T3 Capital Investment Plan

Appendix 4 - Phase 1 Capital Investment Plan

Appendix 5 - Phase 2 Capital Investment Plan

Appendix 6 - Risk & Mitigation Plan

16. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

[The HDC Healthy Open Spaces Strategy was created and published in 2020.](#)

Paxton Pits Extension of Leases - [Cabinet approved an “Extension of Leases” at Paxton Pit Nature Reserve on 16th September 2025.](#)

[A Sustainable Framework for Play in Huntingdonshire](#)

[Habitat Banking Programme](#)

Heritage Lottery Fund - [The National Lottery Heritage Fund: Home](#)

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Appendix 1: T3 Commercial Opportunities Report – Separate Document

Benchmarking & Visitor Economy

UK PEMBREY COUNTRY PARK, Wales	Europe VONDELPARK, Netherlands	Global SOUTHBANK PARKLANDS, BRISBANE	Key Success Levers
			
<p>Size:500 acres Visitation:520,000 Type:Country Park Operator:LA with Private Operators Approx Revenue pa£ 2 . 8 Million Income Streams: F&B, Ski Slope, Campsite Accommodation, Paid Activities, Venue Hire for functions & Weddings</p>	<p>Size:120 acres Visitation:10 Million Type:Public Park Operator:LA with Partners Approx Revenue pa£ 2 - 5 Million Income Streams: F&B, Cafes, Kiosk and Taproom, Parking, Paid for attractions, Sports & Leisure Hire, Events & Sponsorship, Weddings, Open Air Theatre</p>	<p>Size:103 acres Visitation:14 Million Type:Public Park, Riverfront Operator:City Operator Approx Revenue pa£ 26.5–37.1 Million Income Streams: Multiple F&B, Retail Rental, Paid for attractions, Events, Venue Hire, Sponsorship & Concessions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- CONCESSIONS F & B- CONCESSIONS Retail- EVENTS & PROGRAMMING- SEASONAL EVENTS- LEASE & TICKET MODELS- PAID FOR ATTRACTIONS- FOOTFALL & DEVELOPMENT- PUBLIC- PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Appendix 3: T3 Capital Investment Plan

		Capital Investment	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	Yr 4	Yr 5	Yr 10
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	High Low Ropes	500,000	130,660	135,316	138,833	142,403	146,024	164,903
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Weddings	150,000	68,860	73,085	74,802	76,547	78,321	87,636
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Outdoor Sand & Water Play	250,000	77,703	81,357	84,488	87,730	91,087	109,814
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	AquaPark	100,000	13,501	14,228	14,687	15,153	15,623	18,053
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Woodland Axe Throwing	50,000	33,109	34,315	35,097	35,893	36,703	40,967
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Cycling Hub	25,000	-6,416	-5,729	-5,788	-5,849	-5,912	-6,263
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Boating Experiences	25,000	46,678	48,015	49,031	50,067	51,122	56,707
	BeeKeeping & Allotment Play							
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Sound Spots	100,000	28,768	29,869	30,641	31,426	32,222	36,379
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Fun Transport Hire	25,000	38,715	39,902	40,766	41,648	42,547	47,320
Paxton Pits	Sound Spots	25,000	16,906	17,202	17,602	18,009	18,423	20,605
Paxton Pits	GeoCashing	15,000	-1,476	-1,455	-1,444	-1,434	-1,424	-1,380
Priory Park	Jogging Hub	25,000	-6,416	-5,729	-5,788	-5,849	-5,912	-6,263
Riverside Huntingdon	Al Fresco Foodie Experience	100,000	48,803	50,479	51,663	52,868	54,093	60,527
Riverside St Neots	Riverside Dining	500,000	66,593	96,158	98,892	101,663	104,470	119,024
Riverside St Neots	Boating, Padel Board & Boathouse	100,000	11,655	12,296	12,717	13,143	13,573	15,790
Riverside St Neots	Designer Deck Chair Hire	15,000	24,339	25,089	25,631	26,183	26,746	29,722

2,005,000	591,982	644,398	661,830	679,601	697,706	793,541
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Game Changer
Destination Products
Imagination Products
Quick Wins

Appendix 4: Phase 1 Capital Investment Plan

	Capital Investment	Yr 1 (26/27)	Yr 2	Yr 3	Yr 4	Yr 5	Yr 10	Delivered In	Commercial Input
Phase 1:									
Hinchingbrooke Country Park AquaPark	170,000	110,000	113,300	116,699	120,200	123,806	143,525	26/27	26/27
Hinchingbrooke Country Park High Low Ropes	500,000	0	130,660	135,316	138,833	142,403	161,026	26/27	26/27
Hinchingbrooke Country Park Weddings	150,000	0	68,860	73,085	74,802	76,547	85,713	27/28	27/28
Woodland Axe									
Hinchingbrooke Country Park Throwing	50,000	0	33,109	34,315	35,097	35,893	40,085	27/28	27/28
Boating									
Hinchingbrooke Country Park Experiences	25,000	0	46,678	48,015	49,031	50,067	55,548	27/28	27/28
BeeKeeping & Allotment Play									
Hinchingbrooke Country Park Sound Spots	100,000	0	28,768	29,869	30,641	31,426	35,524	27/28	27/28
Fun Transport									
Hinchingbrooke Country Park Hire	25,000	0	38,715	39,902	40,766	41,648	46,327	27/28	27/28
Paxton Pits Sound Spots	25,000	0	16,906	17,202	17,602	18,009	20,154	27/28	27/28
Priory Park Jogging Hub	25,000	0	-6,416	-5,729	-5,788	-5,849	-6,187	27/28	27/28
AI Fresco									
Foodie									
Riverside Huntingdon Experience	100,000	0	0	48,803	50,479	51,663	57,891	27/28	28/29

1,170,000 110,000 470,580 537,477 551,663 565,613 639,605

- Game Changer
- Destination Products
- Imagination Products
- Quick Wins

Appendix 5: Phase 2 Proposed Capital Investment Plan

Phase 2:

Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Outdoor Sand & Water Play	250,000	0	0	77,703	81,357	84,488	101,911	27/28	28/29
Hinchingbrooke Country Park	Cycling Hub	25,000	0	0	-6,416	-5,729	-5,788	-6,115	27/28	28/29
Paxton Pits	GeoCashing	15,000	0	-1,476	-1,455	-1,444	-1,434	-1,387	27/28	27/28
Riverside St Neots	Riverside Dining	500,000	0	0	66,593	96,158	98,892	113,100	27/28	28/29
Riverside St Neots	Boating, Padel Board & Boathouse	100,000	0	0	11,655	12,296	12,717	14,891	27/28	28/29
Riverside St Neots	Designer Deck Chair Hire	15,000	0	0	24,339	25,089	25,631	28,498	27/28	28/29

905,000	0	-1,476	172,419	207,727	214,506	250,898
2,075,000	110,000	469,104	709,896	759,390	780,119	890,504

Current Budget Position	848,525	810,654	796,912	796,082	793,321
Updated Budget Position	738,525	341,550	87,016	36,692	13,202

Updated Budget Position (Following Commercial Strategy)					
	2026/27 Budget (Baseline)	2027/28 New Budget (Baseline)	2028/29 New Budget (Baseline)	2029/30 New Budget (Baseline)	2030/31 New Budget (Baseline)
Expenditure	1,472,674	1,529,491	1,571,575	1,609,630	1,641,869
Income	-624,149	-718,837	-774,663	-813,548	-848,548
Deficit	848,525	810,654	796,912	796,082	793,321
Updated Deficit	738,525	341,550	87,016	36,692	13,202

Appendix 6: Risk & Mitigation Plan

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Capital Investment	Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industry experienced consultant used - Detailed planning executed - Staff engagement sessions facilitated - 2026-2027 MTFS capital bids submitted
Health, Safety & Compliance	Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industry recognised products bought forward - External H&S support in place subject to project delivery - Internal H&S and Risk Management to be followed with HDC colleagues - Independent accreditation submitted and sought where required
Commercial Performance	Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independent financial information delivered by consultants - Financial information to be reviewed and signed off by finance team - Each project to be assessed on own merits – risk-based approach
Local Government Reform (LGR)	High	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Projects put forward can be delivered within 2 years - Project delivery & commercial approach provide positive outcomes for new unitary authority - All projects delivered on a case-by-case basis subject to financial viability & associated risks
Stakeholder Engagement	Medium	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of a stakeholder engagement plan with support from HDC Communication's Team - Facilitation and attendance at key stakeholder group meetings e.g. HCP Friend's Group - Legal review of stakeholder leases with changes by exception
Programme & Project Management	Medium	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industry experienced consultant used + extension to services if required - HDC Project & Programme management teams - Leisure, Health & Environment experience & knowledge - Leisure, Health & Environment Programme Board – Transformation Board

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Ecological Impact	Medium	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ecological Impact Assessments to be undertaken subject to service put forward for delivery- Adequately trained staff utilised to review technical information- External consultants used as required to support technical review and industry best practice- Stakeholder management plan to be implemented and reviewed