

REPORT TO THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE 9 DECEMBER 2009**PORTFOLIO: ENVIRONMENT****REPORT FROM HEAD OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES****SUBJECT: CHERRY ORCHARD JUBILEE COUNTRY PARK
ADVISORY GROUP - 14 OCTOBER 2009****1 DECISION BEING RECOMMENDED**

- 1.1 To consider the specific recommendations of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park Advisory Group.

- (1) That capital provision of £120,000 is considered as part of the budget process for inclusion in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in respect of projects within the Cherry Orchard Country Park each year for the next three years.
- (2) That subject to capital funding being agreed, the indicative programme of works for Cherry Orchard Country Park over the next three years shall comprise:-

<u>2010/11</u>	<u>£000</u>
Grove Woods additional car parking	60
Permissive route for horses and pedestrians through New England Wood to Flemings Farm	45
Arboretum of fruit trees (year 1)	10

<u>2011/12</u>	<u>£000</u>
Service Building, staff and public facilities (Revenue costs of £9,500 p.a.)	140
Arboretum of fruit trees (year 2)	10

<u>2012/13</u>	<u>£000</u>
Construction of wetland	35
Burial of power lines	50
Arboretum of fruit trees (year 3)	10

- (3) That the temporary Woodlands Assistant post created in 2009 be continued, funded from capital, for a period of three years whilst works to create the infrastructure at the Park continue. The establishment of a permanent post to be considered once the Government has announced public spending plans for 2011/12 onwards.

With regard to the decisions taken by the Executive on 28 January 2009, it is recommended that:-

- (4) The decision to take no action with regard to highway works and car park from Cherry Orchard Way is reaffirmed and that Officers should investigate opportunities to obtain a short term lease on land to the east of Cherry Orchard Way that could be used as a temporary car park.
- (5) That in view of the proposal for a permissive route and bridleway identified above, that no further action is taken to restrict access for horses to New England Wood.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 At the meeting of the Executive on 28 January 2009 a programme of works was agreed following consideration of proposals from Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park Advisory Group. The Executive also requested that the Advisory Group report back on a programme of capital schemes for future years.

2.2 The proposals contained within this report are based upon the recommendations made at a further meeting of the Advisory Group on 14 October 2009. In the paragraphs that follow, a progress update is provided in respect of each of the decisions previously taken by the Executive.

2.2.1 *That no further action be taken with regard to vehicular access from Cherry Orchard Way until the proposals emanating from the Joint Area Action Plan (JAAP) are finalised. (R1)*

Whilst the adoption of the JAAP remains on track for 2010, the view has been expressed that it could take several years to achieve the infrastructure improvements to provide vehicular access to the Country Park from Cherry Orchard Way.

In order to encourage visitors, it has been suggested that the Council should identify funding and seek temporary planning permission for a left in left out access/egress from Cherry Orchard Way at a cost of £175,000. Integral with this project would be an adjacent car parking facility within the Country Park costing in the region of £70,000.

The Advisory Group considered that whilst there was a strong case for a car park in terms of attracting more visitors, in the longer term a ghosted right turn at cost of around £250,000, would be required by virtue of the planning consent. Further, as the provision of a highway access to the Country Park is included in the draft JAAP proposals, it was considered that the earlier decision not to commit major capital expenditure on this issue, should be reaffirmed. It was considered however that Officers should investigate opportunities to obtain a short

term lease on land to the east of Cherry Orchard Way that could be used as a temporary car park.

- 2.2.2 *That Officers investigate with Essex County Council the possibility of securing access from the western most point of New England Wood, Connaught Road and Grove Road. (R2)*

Officers have met with ECC to discuss this issue and have determined that the most appropriate option would be to construct a permissive route through the woods that could be used by cyclists, horse riders and pedestrians. This would then link to a new section of bridleway between the woods and Flemings Farm. Essex County Council has agreed to consider match funding this £90,000 project. A £45,000 commitment would therefore be required from Rochford District Council.

- 2.2.3 *That advisory and way-mark signs be provided to all points of access in negotiation with land owners, as appropriate, including Edwards Hall Park, Gusted Hall, Blatches Chase and Flemings Farm Road. (R3)*

These will be installed once the access routes have been agreed with ECC. Recently new signs have been provided at the district boundaries that include brown information signs relating to the Country Park. It was noted that officers would also bring forward proposals to provide directional signs for vehicular traffic.

- 2.2.4 *That Officers identify suitable sites and appropriate designs for seating within the Country Park. The opportunities for sponsoring seating to be promoted with local residents and businesses.(R4)*

No action taken to date. Opportunities will be explored later this year though a Friends of Cherry Orchard Group.

- 2.2.5 *That the provision of bridleway access between Rayleigh Avenue and Flemings Farm Road be a low priority for District Council resources. Officers to investigate the availability of funding for such a bridleway from Essex County Council. (R5).*

See comment on Para 2.2.2 above.

- 2.2.6 *That Officers take immediate action to prevent access by horses into New England Wood and the new areas of tree planting within the Country Park. (R6)*

Negotiations are in hand with horse-riding groups pending the outcome of a formal bridleway and permissive route as identified in Para 2.2.2 above.

- 2.2.7 *That Officers seek funding from Natural England or other bodies with a view to creating a water meadow. (R 7)*

Outline proposals have been developed to create a wetland habitat adjacent to the river at an estimated cost of £80,000. External funding opportunities are being explored but are likely to require some match funding from the Council. A sum of £35,000 is recommended for inclusion in the programme for 2012/13.

- 2.2.8 *That Officers utilize the design proposals developed as a basis for exploring external funding opportunities for an 'Educational and Environmental Centre'. (R8)*

Funding opportunities are expected to arise in the short/medium term. Consideration is likely to need to be given to identifying match-funding in the order of £600,000 in future years.

- 2.2.9 *That subject to available capital funding, the works programme for 2009/10 should include reshaping of stream banks, temporary signage, grass cutting, removal of earth banks, creation of meadows, weed control, the construction of a service compound and ground preparation works. (R9)*

Works to date have included the planting of 7 new woodlands – a total of 36,000 trees (the biggest single tree planting project of this type in Essex this winter).

Good progress has been made with the programme of re-shaping of stream banks, grass cutting, removal of earth banks, creation of meadows, weed control and ground preparation works. With regard to the Service Compound, following a further assessment of the needs of the service the Advisory Group considered that this project should be deferred.

The Advisory Group gave consideration to the standard of storage facilities available at Hockley Woods, the need for staff facilities within the Country Park and the opportunities that would then be created for providing public conveniences. An outline estimate of £140,000 was subsequently received for the construction of a service building together with staff and public facilities. This exceeds the available capital funding by £82,000.

The Advisory Group therefore recommended that a service building should now be constructed in place of the compound, but considered that this should be deferred for two years because of other priorities within the Country Park and the on-going revenue implications for National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), the servicing of the public conveniences and other staffing costs.

- 2.2.10 *That one temporary member of staff, a Woodlands Assistant, is employed for one year only in the Country Park, funded through the Capital Programme. (R10)*

The Woodlands Assistant has proved a great asset in driving forward the programme of on-site works. The Advisory Board recommended that this Officer is now made a permanent member of staff. It was noted that this post could be funded from the Capital Programme whilst major capital works were in progress.

Given the uncertainties over future public sector funding, the Head of Finance, Audit & Performance Management considers it prudent to continue this post for a further three years whilst the cost can be met from the Capital Programme. The potential for the post to be made permanent can be reviewed once the Government has announced public spending plans from 2011/12 onwards.

Additionally, the Advisory Group considered that in the longer term a Park Ranger should be employed to provide a regular presence within the Country Park to maintain public safety, protect the Council's assets and provide advice and assistance to visitors. This would entail an estimated ongoing revenue cost of £25,300 plus vehicle costs.

2.2.11 That Officers investigate the opportunities for extending the working arrangements with the Probation Service already in operation at Hockley Woods and a potential arrangement with Writtle Agricultural College. (R11)

Discussions with the Probation Service are on-going. An offer of assistance has also recently been accepted from Groundwork Trust.

2.2.12 That the Advisory Group submit a further report on the work programme and recommended capital expenditure for future years at the appropriate time. (R12).

2.3 The Advisory Group's recommendations on the priorities for further development of the Park each year over the next three financial years and the associated funding requirements are set out in the decisions being recommended at Section 1 of this report.

2.4 The programme of work was formulated based upon Member priorities, the view that capital expenditure of projects should be capped at £120,000 a year and the need to minimise revenue growth.

2.5 In addition to the projects being recommended for the next three years, the Advisory Group gave consideration to the provision of a children's adventure play facility at the entrance from Cherry Orchard Way. This would assist in significantly increasing the use of the Park and introduce young people to the natural world. Capital cost £76,000, ongoing revenue £4,000 p.a.

3 RISK IMPLICATIONS

3.1 The Park is now of significant size and is attracting increasing numbers of visitors. The facilities constructed in the Park may be vulnerable to damage

owing to the relatively low numbers of staff employed. This risk could be mitigated by ensuring a staff presence throughout the day.

- 3.2 In terms of project risks, the long-term proposals are highly dependent upon external funding, the availability of which can never be guaranteed.

4 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This project provides a significant opportunity to enhance the natural environment and increase biodiversity, in particular the creation of habitats for plants and animals. This is evidenced by the availability of grant aid from Natural England and the Forestry Authority.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 On the basis of the re-prioritisation of projects that has now taken place, there will be an under spend of £58,000 on the capital budget this current financial year which will be rolled forward.
- 5.2 The proposals contained within this report are for a capital requirement of £120,000 each year from 2010/11 to 2012/13. This includes £100,000 for projects and the remainder for continuing the Woodlands Assistant's post. In the longer term the £20,000, which is used to fund the Woodlands Assistant post will need to be contained within revenue budgets, if it is to be made permanent.
- 5.3 The proposals for the construction of a service building will have on-going revenue implications of £7,500 for the servicing of the toilets and £2000 for the NNDR.

I confirm that the above recommendation does not depart from Council policy and that appropriate consideration has been given to any budgetary and legal implications.

SMT Lead Officer Signature: _____

Head of Environmental Services

Background Papers:-

None

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